

# Working Art: Thought, Acting and Knowing

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“That voice – did other people have that too? Did all the others have that too? And what was it, that voice – was it you yourself, or not, or not completely, or was it only at times where you were not aware of yourself? Maybe it was your mirror image, that coincided with you as soon as you caught her. Or was it the only thing that mattered and was all other shell, just like your body. Maybe it was something that relentlessly fed you without you realizing it. Did you have to let it have its way, or, if you weren’t careful, would you then become its meek slave? And did its presence mean that you would start mumbling a little to yourself when you got old? However, it had been there for as long as Louise could remember: the inner monologue, that started upon awakening and that continued to reason, to gather and formulate arguments, reformulate and rearrange – in her case often in the form of a discussion with someone who had said or done something that bothered her.”<sup>1</sup>

The inner monologue, the process of thought that continuously interprets whatever happens and is experienced. Even: what has happened, could happen or should happen – and: what was experienced and that one imagines to experience, or desires to experience. That inner debate in which we relate to what surrounds us, to what happens to us and to what we hear of and imagine of that it is or could be ‘there’.

Personally, I would rather choose the term: inner dialogue. Because, it is a speaking and debating with oneself – or, with an imagined other, or another who is not present and to whom we speak in our imagination. It is the inner voice that Hannah Arendt researched in her unfinished work: the *Life of the Mind*, and whereof she therein wrote: “The thinking activity – according to Plato the dialogue we in silence have with ourselves – serves only to open the eyes of the mind.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, these *eyes of the mind*, are meant in a metaphorical sense by Arendt. It is the ‘eyes’ with which we learn to ‘see’ what things are (there) and what they (might) mean or be.<sup>3</sup> This seeing activity takes place in language, says Arendt: “thoughts ... cannot exist without being spoken.”<sup>4</sup> She adds, “We know that *noemai* (ancient Greek – TK) was first used in the sense of perception with the eyes; then it was transferred to the perceptions of the mind and came to mean “to grasp”; finally it became another word for the highest form of thought.”

She there talks of the ‘thought-thing’, in contrast to the physical, empirical thing. The thing as it is ‘seen’ in the mind. Seeing, one of our senses, is – in a meaningful way – related to sense (meaning). Seeing and grasping (which refers to the sense of touch) are related to hearing (another sense) and to understanding, which in turn relates to how words are understood – as Arendt says – as ‘meaningful noise’.<sup>5</sup> And this cognitive faculty is related to how words have referring meaning and make sense in sentences: “The *logos* is the speech in which words are brought together into a sentence, which is meaningful in its entirety thanks to the synthesis (*synthêkê*),” wrote Arendt. The thought-thing is the thought (or: re-imagined) empirical thing, that becomes meaningful in relation to other things that are thought (*syntehesis*, *syntax*).<sup>6</sup>

Having said this, it becomes obvious that in the arts these issues of meaning and understanding have become ostensive. What is either seen, heard or read is approached as intrinsically *meaningful*. We aim to understand what a work of art means and may mean to us. We wonder why anyone has made the effort to *make* such a thing (*happen*). Why was that poem written? Why is this piece being performed? Why was that painting done?

These questions are fundamentally what is studied at Universities all over the world in the divergent fields of the Humanities. It is the type of study and activity that, like the act of thinking, does not serve any other use than a predisposition to want to learn and understand. It is the fundamental motivation for all science, art and study. It is the simple question: what is that, what does that mean? with which all thinking activity starts.

### Thought, Acting and Language

In her essay for 'Thinking in Art' (eds. P. Sonderren and H. Borgdorff, Leiden University Press, 2012)<sup>7</sup> Prof. Dr. Janneke Wesseling states that a work of art is 'an object' 'that has expressiveness'.<sup>8</sup> To 'make' a work of art, an artist must learn 'to connect the two worlds of thinking and acting,' says Wesseling there.

It must first become a question, however, whether an object-like quality is really an important aspect of a work of art – let alone a necessary aspect. In other words: is a work of art necessarily a thing, an object? When we think of a performative work of (visual) art, such as *This objective of that object* (Steven Sehgal, 2004)<sup>9</sup>, there is no material object that bears any inscriptions of the maker. In this case, there is not even a record of it in the form of a 'recipe', such as Bas Jan Ader, for example, still did (as in his: *Thoughts unsaid, then forgotten*).<sup>10</sup> Apparently, a work of art is not bound by inscriptions made in materials, driven by the creator's thoughts. Even a note of the thoughts is not necessary to do, to be or to make a work of art, as the aforementioned work of Sehgal proves.<sup>11</sup> There may well be no thing, no object – but there can be a work of art that can be recognized by its properties.

Therefore, the relationship between thinking and acting is complicated in a work of art, even if we distinguish these domains from each other and approach them as separate 'worlds', as Dr. Wesseling does in her relevant essay. Again, it must first become a question, especially when it comes to a work of art, whether action is even possible without thought. An action without thought seems to indicate a chance event, such as events driven by natural forces. Events that happen by chance, without purpose, driven by impersonal forces. But doesn't a work of art necessarily have, if not a use, a purpose? If nothing else, at the very least: to be a work of art? A work that belongs to the domain of art? So, when one says that an artist must learn to connect thinking and acting, this seems to be a learning point that is essentially incomprehensible.

Subsequently, professor Wesseling says in her essay that 'the interaction between making and thinking (...) cannot (...) be described completely, no more than all layers of meaning in a work of art can be expressed in language. After all, if that were the case, the artwork would be superfluous.' And she adds: 'Also, language is not by definition necessary for the creation of a work of art. It is possible that a work of art is created intuitively, almost subconsciously (...). Nevertheless, or perhaps just then, for the continuation of the artistic process the need remains to understand what has happened and to (try to) name it.'<sup>12</sup> Wesseling has replaced the previously used concept of 'acting' here with the concept of 'making'.

*Making* (in Dutch: *maken*) has the following description in the Middelnederlandsch Dictionary:

'to prepare; construct; determine; correspond; draw up; recreate; manufacture; describe; conclude; to build; create; set up; produce; to form; to bring in a certain condition; to do; cause; to restore; imitate; being the essence of something; to amount; getting ready; to bring one selves in a certain condition; to betake; to pretend to be something or someone'.<sup>13</sup>

The *Dictionary of the Dutch Language* does not give any significant changes in more recent meanings and use of *making*.<sup>14</sup> The concept 'making' relates to the concept of 'acting', because as a meaning is mentioned – among others: to do. *Doing* means *acting*. *Making* shares its active meanings as a verb with *acting*. However, 'to act' also has the meaning of 'to act badly with someone',<sup>15</sup> which touches on 'treating'. Here, as with 'making', it is about treating someone in a certain way in both words (!) and deeds. This, in turn, fits in with the meanings *describing* and *forming* of 'making', whereby the last meaning: forming, in relation to language-use can also be used as *formulating* in my opinion.

The term *making* seems to semantically cover a wide range of actions and ways of acting. In the light of professor Wesseling's argumentation, we now must ask ourselves: Can *making* and *acting* take place, without thinking and language? What is the relationship between language and thought? Is it possible to think outside language? What kind of thinking then, could a thinking be without language? Dr. Wesseling opts for the concept of 'the subconscious' in her essay, and describes it as a thinking for which no language is needed, or is present in.<sup>16</sup> Because, a work of art that is created intuitively, is created almost subconsciously, according to Wesseling.<sup>17</sup> Language was not necessary in the creation of such a work of art, she states. If we would agree to that, can we then say as well, that a thinking in which language does play a role, is conscious? And is that kind of thought then the opposite of an 'intuitive', i.e. emotional thinking? Can then such a linguistic and conscious thinking perhaps be called rational thinking? And is rational thinking then, in opposition to intuitive thinking, necessarily a thinking without feeling involved?

Viewed in this way, Dr. Wesseling seems to say that the emotional (the intuitive) is subconscious and unnameable (it needs no language and it cannot be expressed), which might allow the inference that the conscious is nameable. However, the emotional and subconscious are not entirely unnameable for Wesseling. In part, it *can* be named, and that is important for understanding it, she says. Trying to name and understand this is important for 'the continuation of the artistic process,' she states. But she also argues that if all the layers of meaning of a work of art could be named, the work of art would be superfluous. But what then can be the meaning of an unnameable meaning? It seems that for Wesseling this is the emotional, which is unnamed and therefore also subconscious. This mindset reminds me of the value attached to irrationality in Breton's surrealism.<sup>18</sup> In this case the question would now become: what does a meaning mean of which one is not aware, because one cannot name it?

The *Dictionary of the Dutch Language* (WNT) makes the concept of *intuitive* even more puzzling in relation to thought, language and art. It gives this description of it:

'Outgoing from, based on the intuition; not mediated by the senses or by reason or intellect; spontaneously.'

And intuition is in the same dictionary:

'The immediate comprehension; the understanding, grasping, understanding without the intervention of the senses or reason.'

The well-known, Dutch Van Dale Dictionary says about intuition: 'insight without thinking.'

Under the concept of 'insight', the Dictionary of the Dutch Language indicates a perhaps clarifying distinction:

'Meanings and views, which are related to 'seeing through / penetration'<sup>19</sup>: Consideration, in different views; Abstract: Contemplation, way of seeing, conception, feeling, judgment - and: Concrete: Way of seeing, opinion, thought, idea.'

And the Etymological Dictionary<sup>20</sup> adds:

'Latin 'intuitus' [looking at, gaze, face], from 'in' [in] + 'tucri' [contemplate, perceive].'

Attempting to summarise, intuition appears to be about an unmediated knowing - a 'seeing' or an insight, achieved not with the senses, but with the mind. The mind as a faculty that however is described as: not reason, but still the insight is described: as a judgment, view and thought - and also as: conception, understanding and, surprisingly, as: feeling. Perhaps: A spiritual feeling, but not reasoning or formulating, which nevertheless leads to a form of knowledge (insight). We must best conclude that *intuitive* is an ambiguous and therefore elusive concept.

Continuing her essay, Dr. Wesseling does not make things any clearer. In the relevant essay she refers to the distinction Kant made between 'Verstand' and 'Vernunft', via Hannah Arendt's 'The Life of the Mind':

‘What is the meaning of words such as knowing, knowledge and thinking? Hannah Arendt discusses this in the first part of her book *The Life of the Mind*, entitled *Thinking*. Here she elaborates on Kant’s distinction between two ways of thinking, *Vernunft* and *Verstand*. Arendt translates these as respectively: reason and intellect. The distinction between the two, which can respectively be translated in Dutch as ‘begrip’ (understanding) and ‘verstand’ (intelligence), coincides, in her opinion, with the distinction between meaning and cognition or knowledge. (...) Understanding transcends (...) the limitations of cognition, namely the criteria of certainty and proof. In the words of Arendt: ‘*The need for reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And meaning and truth are not the same.*’<sup>21</sup>

*Verstand* (intellect, in Arendt) means for Kant: the ability to form concepts from the multitude of observations of the outside world – and subsequently, to systematically form judgements about them. Kant calls the knowledge coming from this type of thinking: knowledge *a posteriori* – knowledge derived from experience – experience here in the sense of: perception. *Vernunft* (reason, in Arendt) is for Kant the more encompassing faculty of cognition, which forms speculative and argumentative connections and recognizes values. Kant calls the knowledge that comes from this type of thought: knowledge *a priori* – knowledge of what is given in advance, prior to experience – again in the sense of perception – or that is added independently of experience. This means that the knowledge of phenomena is not only analysed but also becomes expanded through synthesis and reasoning. An example of *Vernunft* are theoretical mathematics according Kant (mathematics produce a synthetic knowledge, that is not based upon perception but on reason). But above all, Kant says:

‘Without sense no object would be given to us, and without reason no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, perceptions without concepts are blind.’<sup>22</sup>

In Kant, therefore, *Verstand* and *Vernunft* do not function independently of each other, but these two qualities of thinking, of cognition, complement each other. I think it is perhaps fair to say that the opposition of understanding and knowing that Dr. Wesseling suggests in her essay, in which the scientist uses only *Verstand* – which leads to knowledge, and the artist uses only *Vernunft* – which leads to understanding, is not as black and white with Kant and with Arendt.

What is the meaning of words such as knowing, knowledge and thinking, asks professor Wesseling in the relevant essay. She finds ‘the claim that art also produces knowledge ... a hollow phrase when it is impossible to explain what this kind of knowledge is and how it is produced.’ She would rather ask ‘how’ an artist thinks than ‘what’ the artist knows.<sup>23</sup> But shouldn’t the question be first: *can* knowledge be acquired through, with and in art? Only then the question of *what* the nature is of such knowledge, and *how* it is produced, becomes relevant. In the path chosen by Wesseling, it is no longer about becoming acquainted with the type of knowledge that art produces, nor about researching if art can produce knowledge at all, but about becoming acquainted with how an artist thinks, because she assumes (without argumentation) that it is impossible to explain what kind of knowledge art produces.

How someone thinks can be approached from a psychological viewpoint, but also from a biological viewpoint (neurology). The first approach has a perhaps more speculative nature, but in a sense that, to date, has also proved to perhaps be more productive than the second.<sup>24</sup> The second approach is perhaps more empirical and analytic, but provides (as of yet) but little insight into the content and nature of thinking or into the mind in relation to the brain. Rather, the neurological approach provides foremost insights into the chemical and biological processes in the brain, not as much in thought itself.

Another road for asking after the ‘how’ of someone’s thinking, or a certain type of thinking, is the perspective of methodology. Knowledge of which system or logic is used in thinking (about something) is also knowledge of the ‘how’ of a type of thought. This is a more phenomenological or epistemological approach. How an artist thinks can therefore be answered psychologically, biologically or methodologically. These three paths of research lead however, to knowledge and insights of a rather diverse nature.

It seems to me, that when we want to understand something about art (about the work of art and subsequently of artisthood), the question if art produces knowledge, is infinitely more productive than asking how an artist might think. I feel that the question of how an artist functions psychologically and biologically is in contrast with this rather anecdotal – after all, one artist is like that and another was like that. It will be difficult to abstract from the divergent individual ways of thinking to a way of thinking that works for artists in general, methodologically. It is entirely possible too, that there will be divergent methods, several ways of thinking, that may lead to doing works of art.

### Language, Experience and Art

In my chapter (#27): *Imagination in games: Formulation, Re-actualization and Gaining a World in 'Imagination and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory'* (eds K. Moser and A. C. Sukla, Brill, Leiden, 2020),<sup>25</sup> I elaborated which role language plays in the functioning of works of art. For that I chose 'the game' as the archetype for researching the working of the work of art. Game, as both image and instance for the work of art. The type of game that may perhaps work best in this regard, is children's play. Children who have not yet fully acquired language are already playing with their fingers, and with the edges of cloths and the like. It is difficult to determine whether, and how much, language plays a role in this first play. It is tempting to say that such a first play is perhaps mainly about the *pleasure* of movement and about the *sense* of touch. One can determine that this behaviour is play, because it is already about repeating (more or less) the same actions. There already is a pattern, a rule that is followed – that is played out. It may be tempting to interpret this early game from the purpose of *practice*: the child is practicing its fine motor skills. I believe it is probable that this is in part true and fitting. But in later play, when children already possess some proficiency in language, language obviously plays a major role in game and play. Words are then often used when playing, which put the actions in a certain context and that establish a certain relationship between what the child does and what she or he thinks. More often, especially when the child has become more proficient in language, the actions of the game are being told at the same time. The game resembles a story that arises from playing, and that the child tells her- or himself while doing it. At the start of the game, there is often a certain framework established, within and with which is played. Which is also done by telling and describing. In my essay for *Imagination and Art* I call this the delineation or demarcation of the world of the game.

Think of the game: 'Moms and Dads', where children often start with the question: shall we do Moms and Dads? After that is agreed upon, certain additional agreements are made, such as: this was our house, and then I was the mother and you were the father, and this was our child. The world of the game is here defined and provided with rules and with its own narrative. A narrative that often extends into a (fictitious) history: things are so and so, because so and so had happened before. It is important for understanding how the work of art works, to establish here, that language has a key role in play. It demarcates the world of the game, it sets the rules and goals, and describes why things are the way they are in the game. I am not talking about what actually is or is not said in the game, but about how the game, in itself, is thought and conceived as a certain, as that specific game. Some things may well be left unsaid, but are taken for understood and agreed implicitly. Although 'practice' and 'fun' play an obvious role in this type of game, there is also the use of the imagination as an encompassing faculty of cognition.

Just as a work of art can be recognized by its properties, a specific game also distinguishes itself from another by possessing specific properties. Moms and Dads is a different game from playing Soldier, or playing Cops and Robbers. It is also possible to return to that one specific game, for example to a game of Moms and Dads that was interrupted. Children can interrupt the game, for example to have dinner or lunch, and return to it later. To continue playing it, or, as they sometimes say: 'finish' it. Also, players can call each other to order, if the other does something that is not right in and for that particular game. In my essay for *Imagination and Art*, I quote Gadamer, where he says:

‘all playing is a being played’.<sup>26</sup> This means that it is not the player who determines the game, but that the game determines what the player can and cannot do – what can and what cannot be part of the game. This makes clear how much the game is ‘itself’, and why it is that children can call each other to its order. The latter can lead to a discussion, in which the players test and argue why something is or is not ‘possible’, or is or is not ‘allowed’ in the game. The game dictates what the player does. As Gadamer says:

‘The game is only game if it is taken seriously. Earnestness is not only something that takes us away from the game, the game itself has to be played earnestly if it is to be completely game. Whoever does not take the game seriously is a spoilsport.’<sup>27</sup>

The role that language plays in this aspect of the game is evident. A game is never ‘just a game’, because as soon that is said (and saying is thinking and acting at once!) all players are withdrawn from the game – and it already has disappeared. However, the game is only gone until the child (the player) that was called to order, changes its attitude, and starts playing the game again as that what the game in itself is and was. We can see herein that a specific game has specific properties, that can be pointed out and be discussed.

I want to add here that, just as the boundary between thought and language is mysterious (language is not a mere medium that the thought uses to express itself in, but is rather the place where the thought arises in and from), the boundary between play and reality is mysterious. Within the game, what is played out is just as real as everything that happens outside it. Until the game stops being played. What was experienced in the game (even if this was ‘as if’, that is: imagined), can be real experiences, in the sense that one learns something about the world or about oneself in the world.<sup>28</sup> As Gadamer has said it:

“If we gain an experience based on an object, it means that we have not seen things right so far and now know better how things are. It is not simply a mistake that is understood and . . . corrected, but an insight that is obtained, with far-reaching consequences. Therefore, it cannot be a randomly picked up object to which one gains an experience, but it must be so that one can gain a better understanding on the basis of this, not only about this object, but about what one thought they knew before.”

We see now that language and acting, or: thinking and acting (and remember: acting is also making), are mysteriously intertwined in play – just as play and reality are entwined. In my essay for *Imagination and Art*, I quote Paul Ricoeur, who says that the use of language is an act in itself.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand: that something is said (at a time and in a place, by someone to someone), and on the other hand: that this saying is understood as meaningful (something is said about something).<sup>30</sup> The dialectic of occurrence and meaning is, according to Ricoeur, preceded by the dialectic of meaning and reference.<sup>31</sup> Every use of language ‘is always about something’, says Ricoeur: ‘it refers to a world that it claims to describe, express or represent. The event is, in this . . . sense: the creation of a world in language.’<sup>32</sup> It should be clear that exactly this is what happens in game. Without language, the world of the game would not (or only very poorly) come to be. And this world of the game is in a meaningful way related to the living world in, through and by language – in ever wider circles. In my chapter for *Imagination and Art*, I call this: gaining knowledge about the world and about being in the world. By ‘world’ we simply mean, as Ricoeur says, ‘the meaning we all understand when we say of a newborn child that it has come into the world.’<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur specifies that ‘world’ is the whole of all references that we seen or read, and have somehow ‘understood’.

When we return to the working of the work of art from these insights about the role of language in play, the main question is whether language indeed has a similar role there. Ader’s aforementioned work, *Thoughts unsaid...*, was handed down in a note. A text. Sehgal’s aforementioned work, *This objective...*, has no material inscription. Apparently, Sehgal activates the work by *telling* employees and volunteers what the work is. In many ways like kids tell each other what they’re going to play when they’ve agreed to do Moms and Dads, for example. The role of language may be less easily

traceable in works that do carry material inscriptions by the makers, such as painting or sculpture. And of course, I wondered what it was like, for example when I was working on my painting series ‘Stains: not facing reality’, or another project in which I made use of material media. An artist who works in traditional painting media agrees with him-, her- or themselves what she, he or they is going to do. The demarcation of the world of the work by self-imposed rules (or perhaps: starting points) and goals plays a role, as well as a certain narrative about the content of the work (about what is painted, even if this has no figurative reference), its form and the history of the project (what has already been done in and from the project) – and something like a *history of painting* in which one positions oneself. Just like in a game, the outcome of a work is not yet certain when the artists starts working. This outcome, the result, arises from doing it (from: playing – or, in this case: working). The artist can’t but do anything, he has to take his work seriously if he doesn’t want to let it fail and spoil it. He cannot do in this specific work what he did in that other work, he must follow the rules and narrative of this specific work: that determines what is and what is not part of that work, what can and cannot be done. If he nevertheless does something that was not allowed, an internal dialogue will start, in which he discusses with himself: is this possible, or justified, or not, and why? From the example of the practice of the game it should now be clear how something like that may work.

### Knowing and Understanding, Knowledge and Meaning

I hope, I have now made it sufficiently plausible that language is ‘by definition necessary for the creation of a work of art,’ using Prof. Dr. Wesseling’s words. Language has a similar role for the functioning of the artwork after the maker has stopped working on it, especially if we accept that the artist appears in her or his work as its ‘first reader’, as Ricoeur has put it.<sup>34</sup> Here, we should understand *reader* above all in the sense of *one who reads*, that is to say:

‘To bring together a distinctive modification of meaning, reminiscent of the oldest condition of Germanic civilization: to take up and assemble the runic rods, in order to gather the meaning, to read the runes. (...) Later the same word was also applied to the written characters, although it could thereof really not be said; it is remarkable, however, that Lat. *legere* and Gk. *legein*, although etymologically unrelated, unite the two meanings – reading and gathering.’<sup>35</sup>

An artist is always busy reading. From the first act in the creation of a work, the dialogue between the artists intentions, questions and interpretations, and the work as it arises, happens and shapes the following actions the artist takes. The artist is constantly busy interpreting what the work commands him to do and what it allows or prohibits. Just like the game commands its players to take it seriously. Later contemplators of the piece participate in that work (as an established piece) in much the same way, but without further adapting or changing the work: as either readers or players.

Wesseling’s intuitive, instinctive ‘knowing’ can perhaps be understood better as well from the viewpoint of child’s play. Much in such game is often implied, it is more or less ‘known’ by all participants without it explicitly being discussed or defined by its players. Especially when they’ve played together a lot, already. Often, there is a whole framework of presuppositions, rules, principles and stories implied from which players start. It is only hinted at, when a player has forgotten something and does or says something ‘wrong’.

When rethinking professor Wesseling’s intuition, I must admit that I personally don’t believe in any intuition or an inspiration that just ‘falls from the sky’, as it were, on either a playing child or a working artist. But, for the latter, I do believe that someone who has worked a lot as an artist, already has a lot of implied ‘framework’ at hand, so that it may seem – looking from the outside in – as if ‘it’ just ‘pops up’, or mysteriously ‘flew in’ what such an artist does. In addition, I feel it is often the case that those who like to talk about ‘inspiration’ or ‘intuition’ (in their own work or that of others) tend to tread the most well-trodden paths. By relying on the unnameable, or the subconscious, in my opinion people mainly rely on the most common knowledge: the most general framework that is at

hand. The framework from which those work is neither questioned nor researched – because the ‘instinct’ is supposed to ‘know’ miraculously. This way of not-thinking raises no new insights, because such supposed instinctive or intuitive ‘knowing’ is usually not described (named) and thus can’t be investigated. It is not without reason that Dr. Wesseling says as well in her essay, that ‘for the continuation of the artistic process it is necessary ‘to understand what has happened and (try to) name it.’<sup>36</sup> However, I don’t believe artists really are so ‘dumb’, at least not the good ones. I agree with Kant in the quote cited earlier: ‘Without sense no object would be given to us, and without reason no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, perceptions without concepts are blind.’<sup>37</sup> In art (as in play) the meaning of what is done becomes ostensive. So, whatever the artist does, all the artist’s actions when doing art, are thought. What is done is approached (pre-understood) as meaningful. As Arendt has said it: “the work of art finds its origin in the human mind,” and: “works of art are things of thought.”<sup>38</sup>

Thinking and speaking are indistinguishable. What is said is thought at the same time. And what is thought can be said. As Arendt says it: “thoughts ... cannot exist without being spoken.”<sup>39</sup> To be able to think about something, it first needs to be (re-)imagined. And what was imagined, needs to be said (be given form, become formulated). There is much to say for the thought, that in order to *know* something, that which is or becomes known (the *knowledge*) must be said – must be ‘put into words’. After all: thoughts unsaid are then forgotten...<sup>40</sup> In my chapter for *Imagination and Art* I therefore propose to approach all imaginable knowledge as imagined *formulations*. Much like play and game exists and plays through, with and in formulations. In language-use the world of the game is delineated, with its rules, aims and narrative. In my opinion, works of art should therefore be understood foremost as formulations. Not so much as a thought that is subsequently given a form (a thought that was formulated), but rather as a form that formulates thoughts (a formulation that makes other formulations possible and even needed). From the description and analysis of what the form shows, is and does, insights are formulated, which can then be named as knowledge. This is a heuristic and hermeneutical process.

To answer the question: Does art yield knowledge, we must first look again at the schism that Dr. Wesseling suggests between knowledge and meaning. When we return to the example that Arendt gives of the alleged difference between meaning (understanding) and truth (knowledge), the centaur,<sup>41</sup> we may say truthfully that we *know* what a centaur is, even if we also *understand* that such a creature does not actually exist. Perhaps you have noticed how, in this sentence, I have mixed the concepts of knowing and understanding up with the dialectic of meaning and knowledge. We may say as well: we *understand* what a centaur is and we *know* that it does not exist. Here, knowledge appears not as either true or untrue, in the sense of actually existent (true) or inexistent (untrue). So, how does truth and knowledge relate, and how do these two concepts relate to the concept of *reality* in terms of empiricism – or, as Dr. Wesseling has formulated it: a knowledge that meets “criteria of certainty and proof?” When is knowledge certain? When is it truthful? And when is understanding true? And, if an understanding is true, does it then become knowledge? Or: if knowing that something is untrue, is such knowledge then not knowledge but rather an understanding?

I think it is fair to say that the definitions of the terms *knowledge*<sup>42</sup> and *meaning*<sup>43</sup> cover a broad range of meanings, just like the term *making* was. Knowing and knowledge are not concepts that contrast with the meaning of the concepts understanding and meaning. Rather, the terms are related and overlay each other: all meaning is or can be known and all knowledge is meaningful – although the usability of it may vary in certain contexts and its certainty may well have a more provisional and argumentative character. We have learned what a centaur is, by understanding what that term refers to and thus means. Even if it is an inexistent creature, we know what it is – and in certain contexts such knowledge becomes meaningful and can be changed or complemented.

We need again return to the topic of language to grasp some of this. Instead of saying: it is meaningless to know what a centaur is in this context, we could perhaps also say: it makes no sense to



know what a centaur is *here*. But if we said that, has the knowledge of what the centaur is really become senseless? Indeed, we cannot see (sense) the centaur, except by our minds eyes. But if we described the centaur, the formulation or the sentence(s) would make *sense*. By a sensible formulation we *know* what a centaur is, even if it *is* not really, actually, or physically (there). A formulation is not senseless when it is not based upon a sensory perception. Sense and senselessness are rather related to the context in which a formulation functions, not to the formulation itself.

By writing this, I intend to make visible (at least to the mind's eye), how understanding and meaning – knowing and knowledge – sense and the senses are entangled with one another and with their linguistic or thought form: the formulation that describes and defines a certain understanding or belief. A form that makes sense through syntax and synthesis. I remind here of Kant: 'thoughts without content (i.e. meaning – TK) are empty.'<sup>44</sup> Again: finding meaning is a heuristic and hermeneutic process that encompasses both knowledge and understanding at once. From analysis of what the form shows, is and does (in context), new insights are formulated (syntax and synthesis), which can then be named as knowledge. Both Kant's forms of knowledge, a posteriori and a priori, are at play and are related in a meaningful manner.

Knowledge and understanding are not opposites. Vernunft (reason) and Verstand (intellect) are related in meaningful ways. Knowledge is in itself a meaning (that which is or becomes known) that needs<sup>45</sup> to be understood. The kinds of knowledge that are found through, with and in art, may well be of a divergent nature. The cognition science and epistemology will make clear what types of knowledge can be conceptualised. It may well be that art provides mostly a speculative knowledge, but certainly not just. Narrowing down the type of knowledge that is produced in art to a term like: understanding – and dealing with that as if it were an opposite of the type of knowledge that meets certain criteria of certainty and proof, is in my opinion not useful.<sup>46</sup> It makes the study and practice of art a lesser good than the exact sciences. An often quoted citation says: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."<sup>47</sup> A speculative and argumentative knowledge is still a form of knowledge, that has its own methods to test its validity.<sup>48</sup>

Whatever nature the knowledge acquired through art has, it comes down to what Adorno accurately said:

'What the work demands from its beholder is knowledge, and indeed knowledge that does justice to it: the work wants its truth and untruth to be grasped.'<sup>49</sup>

Art is not a practice of 'making', in the sense of 'assembling', but art is a practice that is 'performed' or 'done' like the sciences. And like games are done. Art is a *practice*, in the sense of Alasdair MacIntyre's description:

'a coherent and complex form of socially recognized, cooperative human activity (...) by which goods intrinsic to this form of activity are realized in the course of efforts to meet standards of excellence that apply to and partly define this form of activity. As a result, not only are the human capacities to achieve excellence systematically expanded, but also human ideas about the associated ends and goods.'<sup>50</sup>

The English term *art* comes etymologically from the Latin term for *knowledge* – encompassing 'knowledge of' and 'knowing how' at once.<sup>51</sup> I propose to stay with that origin: the arts<sup>52</sup> were and are a domain of knowledge acquisition. Knowledge, of a diverse nature, in which knowing and understanding become related in a meaningful way. A practice through, with and in which, people can learn and understand what is there in the world and how to be in the world themselves (what is that, what does that mean?). Moreover, a practice by which people are able to gain a *world*, rather than just be in a specific situation. A way to *make (!)* the earth into a home, rather than a place where one is just trying to get by.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stephan Enter, *Pastorale* (deel: Twee), Van Oorschot, Amsterdam, 2019, p. 107 (translated from Dutch by myself. All translations of the Dutch publications and translations cited are my own, unless otherwise indicated).
- <sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Het Leven van de Geest*, Ten Have, Utrecht, 2020, p. 37.
- <sup>3</sup> The relation between meaning and (ontological) being is meaningful and interesting. In ‘Codex Hortus Conclusus’ (Ton Kruse, 2019) Gerard Visser wrote after citing a poem by Chris van Geel: “The poem says that every tree is a slightly different ‘open mouth of the wind’. Assuming that this ‘is’ is not synonymous with ‘appears’, does then not the image break through the opposition of actual and imaginary? Doesn’t it touch on the ground experience of the East that the only real thing about the tree is its emptiness, which takes shape in its relationships?” (pages in this work are not numbered, as it is not a book in a common sense, but rather a graphic work of (visual) art) What a thing or a case ‘is’ becomes that by what it ‘means’, which is defined by its relationships.
- <sup>4</sup> Arendt, cited work, p. 144
- <sup>5</sup> Arendt, cited work, p. 143
- <sup>6</sup> Perhaps interesting, later on in this paper I will return to this thought, is the difference that Arendt makes between ‘meaning’ and ‘truth’. She takes the example of the word ‘centaur’ after Aristotle, which is meaningful (we can know/understand what that word means/refers to) but is not something true or untrue, unless in the context of being and non-being. But equally interesting is, that we can say we ‘know’ what a centaur ‘is’, while we also know that such a creature does not actually exist. What interests me, is that we may use the term and concept of knowing in alternation with the term and concept of understanding. The empirical or physical ‘thing’ seems interchangeable with the thought-thing, without it ever being a problem that it is not ‘really there’ in a physical sense.
- <sup>7</sup> *Denken in Kunst*, editors P. Sonderen & H Borgdorff, Leiden University Press, Leiden, 2012
- <sup>8</sup> Janneke Wesseling, *Hoe Denkt een Kunstenaar*, Theorie en Reflectie in het Kunstonderwijs, in: *Denken in Kunst*, LUP, Leiden, 2012, p. 39: “To create a work of art, an object that has expressiveness, it is necessary that the student learns to connect the two worlds of thinking and acting.”
- <sup>9</sup> A description of this piece may be found here: <https://walkerart.org/collections/artworks/this-objective-of-that-object> (14-09-2021)
- <sup>10</sup> Ader did this piece originally in 1973, for a seven day exhibition at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. See: [https://issuu.com/galeriewest/docs/west\\_david\\_horvitz\\_09\\_2010](https://issuu.com/galeriewest/docs/west_david_horvitz_09_2010) (14-09-2021)
- <sup>11</sup> Here I want to remember a diary notation by Hugo Ball, dated: Bern, 7-9-1917: “It seems to me that thinking can also be an art, and in that sense, it is subject to the laws of art: namely, by focusing our attention on distinguishing certain thoughts and series of thoughts; by drawing boundaries and giving space and content only to certain perceptions and by avoiding others. ... As in the other arts, in thinking it is decisive what you have left out and have not mentioned, for in what way you have distinguished yourself.” (Hugo Ball, *Vlucht uit de Tijd*, Vantilt, Nijmegen, 2016, p. 195)
- <sup>12</sup> Wesseling, *Hoe denkt een kunstenaar*, p. 40: “Awareness of the interaction between making and thinking does not mean that the interaction can also be fully described. Just like all layers of meaning of a work of art cannot be expressed in language. After all, if that were the case, the artwork would be superfluous. (...) Also, language is not by definition necessary for the creation of a work of art. It is possible that a work of art is created intuitively, almost unconsciously, and that it immediately hits the mark. Nevertheless, or perhaps just then, there is for the continuation of the artistic process the need remains to understand what has happened and to (try to) name it.”
- <sup>13</sup> The *Middelnederlandsch Dictionary* describes the vocabulary of Middle Dutch; the Dutch that was spoken from about 1250 to 1550 in the area that roughly coincides with the present Netherlands and Flanders. The first nine parts are written by Dr. Eelco Verwijs and Dr. Jakob Verdam. Prof. Willem De Vreese and G.I. Lieftinck edited the Building materials or source list (MNW part 10), Dr. Anton Beekman expanded the series with an eleventh part about the waters of the Netherlands. The first part of the dictionary was published in 1885 and the last volume in 1941.
- <sup>14</sup> The *Dictionary of the Dutch Language (WNT)* describes the meaning and history of hundreds of thousands words from written Dutch from 1500 to 1976. In 1851 Matthias de Vries presented his design for a ‘complete Dutch linguistic dictionary’. Since then, five generations of editors have worked on the WNT for almost a century and a half. When it was completed in 1998, it consisted of a whopping 40 fat bindings.

- <sup>15</sup> This is perhaps a Dutch saying that can't be translated properly to English without loosing the term 'act'.
- <sup>16</sup> With this term and concept Wesseling seems to refer to the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud from the beginnings of the twentieth century.
- <sup>17</sup> See footnote 10.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Pure psychological automatism with which one intends to, in word and writing or in any other way, express the real mode of functioning of thought. Dictation of thought, without control of reason, in any form, free from aesthetic or ethical bias.' p. 303 André Breton, *The surrealist manifesto* (1924) in Dutch translation by F. Drijkoningen & J. Fontijn, *Historische avant garde, Huis aan de drie grachten*, Amsterdam, 1986.
- <sup>19</sup> Here the translation of the Dutch term 'inzien' becomes sensitive: as in Dutch the term is a literal combination of the words 'in' and 'seen' – I chose to translate that into 'see through' with the connotation of the term 'penetration', as these say together that an insight is about seeing through a case or thing, and doing so with a deep comprehension of the case or thing.
- <sup>20</sup> P.A.F. van Veen en N. van der Sijs, *Etymologisch woordenboek: de herkomst van onze woorden*, Van Dale Lexicografie, Utrecht/Antwerpen, 1997.
- <sup>21</sup> Wesseling, *Hoe denkt een kunstenaar*, p. 41: "The claim that art also produces knowledge remains a hollow phrase when it is impossible to explain what this kind of knowledge is and how it is produced. I think it is better to focus on the differences in the way of thinking of artists and scientists, than on the similarities. The question that must be asked is not so much 'what do artists know?', but 'How do artists think?'. The verb 'knowing' leads us in the wrong direction (...). What is the meaning of words such as knowing, knowledge and thinking? Hannah Arendt discusses this in the first part of her book *The Life of the Mind*, entitled *Thinking*. Here she elaborates on Kant's distinction between two ways of thinking, *Vernunft* and *Verstand*. Arendt translates these as respectively: reason and intellect. The distinction between the two, which can respectively be translated in Dutch as 'begrip' (understanding) and 'verstand' (intelligence), coincides, in her opinion, with the distinction between meaning and cognition or knowledge. (...) Understanding transcends (...) the limitations of cognition, namely the criteria of certainty and proof. In the words of Arendt: '*The need for reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And meaning and truth are not the same.*'"
- <sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritiek der Reinen Vernunft*, 3, 75 – as cited on: <https://webapp.fkt.uvt.nl/gfo/default/index/kani-1k5> 23.09.2021.
- <sup>23</sup> Wesseling, *Hoe denkt een kunstenaar*, p. 41.
- <sup>24</sup> For instance, Freud's theory of the subconscious, the ego and the super-ego, is perhaps speculative, but does provide an insightful image of how feelings, behaviour and thought interact and what it may mean for a human being, to be a cultural animal.
- <sup>25</sup> Ton Kruse, *Imagination in Games: Formulation, Re-actualization and gaining a World*, In: *Imagination and Art, Explorations in Contemporary Theory*, editors Keith Moser and Ananta Ch. Sukla, Brill, Leiden, 2020.
- <sup>26</sup> Kruse, *Imagination in Games*, p. 656.
- <sup>27</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Vantilt, Nijmegen, 2014, p. 111.
- <sup>28</sup> Paragraph 'Games: Experience and Language', Ton Kruse, Ch. 27, *Imagination in Art*, Brill, Leiden, 2020 – on p. 653 of that paragraph, I quote Gadamer (*Truth and Method*, Vantilt, Nijmegen, 2014, p. 464): "Speaking is ... never merely sharing the singular under general terms. In the use of words the visual given is not made available as a separate case of something general, but it has become present in the saying itself ... How the importance of the things that we encounter in understanding, is played out, is itself a linguistic process, so to speak: a game with words that spell out the intended meaning ... This is not about a game with language or with what appeals to us in the experience ... but about the game of language itself, which appeals to us, makes proposals and withdrawals, asks and finds its fulfillment in the answer itself."
- <sup>29</sup> Kruse, *Imagination in Games*, p. 652.
- <sup>30</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Tekst en Betekenis, Opstellen over de interpretatie van teksten*, Ambo, Baarn, 1991, p. 74: "Each language-use is actualized as an event, but is understood as a meaning."
- <sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, *Tekst en Betekenis*, p. 83.
- <sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, *Tekst en Betekenis*, p. 99.
- <sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, *Tekst en Betekenis*, p. 99.
- <sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, *Tekst en Betekenis*, p. 112.
- <sup>35</sup> *Middel Nederlandsch Dictionary*, see footnote 11, 'lezen' (reading). In the *Dictionary of the Dutch Language (WNT)* 'lezen' (reading) is described as follows: 'Collect, gather (...) to sort out, from a multitude or a quantity. (...) To sort out, to shift, to clean. (...) Of that which is written or printed (or can be equated with scripture). To survey the letters (or other characters) and convert them into words, whether spoken or

merely thought. (...) To comprehend something, understand something, from what one reads. (...) It is expressed by a fig. relation (...) that one perceives something in any way, comes to know it, notice it.'

<sup>36</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>37</sup> See footnote 19.

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt, *De Menselijke Conditie*, Boom, Amsterdam, 2009, p. 152 & p. 153.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>40</sup> Here, I refer again to Bas Jan Ader's 'Thoughts Unsaid Then Forgotten' 1973, see footnote 10.

<sup>41</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>42</sup> The term knowledge is described as follows on the online dictionary of Merriam-Webster: 1. a(1): the fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association; a(2): acquaintance with or understanding of a science, art, or technique; b(1): the fact or condition of being aware of something; b(2): the range of one's information or understanding answered to the best of my knowledge; c: the circumstance or condition of apprehending truth or fact through reasoning : cognition; d: the fact or condition of having information or of being learned; 2. a: the sum of what is known : the body of truth, information, and principles acquired by humankind; b archaic: a branch of learning; 3. archaic: sexual intercourse.

<sup>43</sup> The online dictionary of Merriam-Webster describes the term meaning as follows: 1. a: the thing one intends to convey, especially by language: purport; b: the thing that is conveyed, especially by language: import; 2. something meant or intended: aim; 3. significant quality, especially: implication of a hidden or special significance; 4. a: the logical connotation of a word or phrase; b: the logical denotation or extension of a word or phrase.

<sup>44</sup> See footnote 22.

<sup>45</sup> Asks, wants, needs, demands – it can be interesting to think through the connotations of the used verb.

<sup>46</sup> Relevant for this supposed dichotomy of reason and intellect, of the arts and the natural sciences, is also Martin Heidegger's essay 'The Thing' (Martin Heidegger, *Over denken, bouwen, wonen*, SUN, Nijmegen, 1999): "The ... coercive knowledge of the sciences has already destroyed things as such, long before the atomic bomb exploded. Its detonation is but the grossest of all gross affirmations of the destruction of the thing that happened already long ago: of the fact that the thing remains void as a thing. The thingness of the thing remains hidden, forgotten. Its essence does not appear, that is, come to speak. ... The destruction is therefore so ominous, because it entails a twofold blindness: on the one hand, the view that before every other experience science grasps the real in its reality; on the other, the illusion that, irrespective of the scientific investigation of the real, things could still be things, which presupposes that in every respect they have always been things unfolding their being as such. If, however, things had already manifested themselves as things in their thingness, the thingness of the thing would have been manifested. It would have become known in thought." Heidegger formulates in this essay the insight that knowing what things are, only comes to *speak in thought*, but *is* ostensive in experience – as a gift that collects a range of meaningful relations. Elaborating Heidegger's argumentation further in this paper, would make things needlessly complex.

<sup>47</sup> William Bruce Cameron, *Informal Sociology, a casual introduction to sociological thinking*, Random House, New York, 1963, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> As Ricoeur says (Ricoeur, *Tekst en Betekenis*, p. 139), criteria of relative superiority can easily be derived from the logic of subjective probability.

<sup>49</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 1997, p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 2007, p. 187.

<sup>51</sup> Latin noun, *ars*: method, way; science, knowledge; skill.

<sup>52</sup> This term may refer to the Liberal Arts as well.

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