

Michael Schwab

PART A: Foundations of Artistic Research

Versuch einer Selbstkritik (1886)

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Was ich damals zu fassen bekam, etwas Furchtbares und Gefährliches, ein Problem mit Hörnern, nicht nothwendig gerade ein Stier, jedenfalls ein neues Problem: heute würde ich sagen, dass es das Problem der Wissenschaft selbst war - Wissenschaft zum ersten Male als problematisch, als fragwürdig gefasst. Aber das Buch, in dem mein jugendlicher Muth und Argwohn sich damals ausliess - was für ein unmögliches Buch musste aus einer so jugendwidrigen Aufgabe erwachsen! Aufgebaut aus lauter vorzeitigen übergrünen Selbsterlebnissen, welche alle hart an der Schwelle des Mittheilbaren lagen, hingestellt auf den Boden der Kunst - denn das Problem der Wissenschaft kann nicht auf dem Boden der Wissenschaft erkannt werden - ein Buch vielleicht für Künstler mit dem Nebenhange analytischer und retrospektiver Fähigkeiten (das heisst für eine Ausnahme- Art von Künstlern, nach denen man suchen muss und nicht einmal suchen möchte...), voller psychologischer Neuerungen und Artisten-Heimlichkeiten, mit einer Artisten-Metaphysik im Hintergrunde, ein Jugendwerk voller Jugendmuth und Jugend-Schweremuth, unabhängig, trotzig-selbstständig auch noch, wo es sich einer Autorität und eignen Verehrung zu beugen scheint...

Attempt at Self-Criticism (1886)

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What I managed to seize upon at that time, something fearful and dangerous, was a problem with horns (not necessarily a bull exactly, but in any event a new problem). Today I would state that it was the problem of scholarship itself, scholarly research for the first time grasped as problematic, as dubious. But that book, in which my youthful courage and suspicion then spoke, what an impossible book had to grow out of a task so contrary to the spirit of youth!

Created out of merely premature and really immature personal experiences, which lay close to the threshold of something communicable, and built on the basis of art (for the problem of scientific research cannot be understood on the basis of scientific enquiry)—a book perhaps for artists with analytical tendencies and a capacity for retrospection (that means for exceptions, a type of artist whom it is necessary to seek out and whom one never wants to look for), full of psychological innovations and artists' secrets, with an artist's metaphysics in the background, a youthful work full of the spirit of youth and the melancholy of youth, independent, defiantly self-sufficient as well, even where it seemed to bow down with special reverence to an authority...

The year is 2014. It is 128 years since Nietzsche wrote this *Attempt at Self-Criticism*, 125 years since he stopped writing and 114 years since he stopped living altogether. To understand what 128 years mean in the history of thought, we could go back another 128 years before 1886 to the year 1758, which is thirty-one years before the French Revolution, twenty-three years before Kant published his first *Critique*, and forty years before the first issue of the *Athenaeum* was published. However, 1758 is eight years after Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, which announced the possibility that art could, one day, matter epistemically.

The year is 2014. It is twenty-two years since in countries such as the UK artists could obtain what is called a 'practice-led' doctorate in philosophy, though to this day many other countries still do not offer doctorates in art. It is one year since the European Research Council started to fund artistic research, though there are no books on the methodology or epistemology of artistic research available that could inscribe what we do into a horizon of 128 years, 256 years, or the history of thought in general. There are, however, positions that doubt whether methodologies or epistemologies of artistic research can ever be had, since the *logos* they claim to deliver may make the project contradictory and potentially impossible. This speculation about possible methodologies or epistemologies of artistic research represents a challenge to philosophy.

The problem with *logos* is already at play when we look at how philosophy approaches art. In general, for philosophy, art is either a territory to be conquered or a resource to draw from. Take the famous example of Heidegger, who needed a painting of shoes to open up a particular horizon of truth, short-circuiting art with a particular representation, as if things lower down, dirty perhaps, are more destined to tell us what art is and what the world is. Derrida, quite rightly, saw something gauche in this use and abuse, but, like Heidegger before him, also succumbs to the temptations of taste and interpretation when he uses the work of Valerio Adami in an attempt to leave his mark on art.

When looking at art, philosophy slips in and out of the interpretation, which is a comfortable position, since in this construction art cannot really critique philosophy because it is always cushioned by this or that *dispositif* that makes it appear in philosophy in the first place. It is for this reason that Nietzsche, in those sentences, asks us to grasp the problem of 'Wissenschaft' ('science') deep down enough – that is, 'Wissenschaft' *as problem* – and demands that the values that guard its hegemony are overthrown in a transvaluation of all values and a radicalisation of art. At noon, when the shadows are briefest and the end of the longest error is reached, all comfortable concepts of art or philosophy have disappeared in the task to think anew what it means to know.

The task of the artistic researcher is not only to think something but also to think how this something can be thought in order to meet it in a *just* way. In artistic research, a particular thing belongs to a particular world, which no other, preconceived world can replace or explain. Roland Barthes – in a different context – calls for an 'impossible science of the unique being', a thinking particular to a particular.

The project of this impossible science was already sketched by early Romantic thinkers, most importantly by Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, but also by Hölderlin. The Romantic project radicalised Kant's critical project in the name of art and through art. What if imagination was not to serve the understanding and the arrow of cause and effect was to be turned on its head, pointing backwards from reason to the manifold of the world and the unique being within it?

In general, there is very little to be said as thought approaches a particular, apart from that we expect its form to also change since on the level of the particular there is no difference between matter and form, nothing else a thing would also be apart from what it is. For Nietzsche that meant that thinking had to break out of stasis and that attention had to be given to its movement, melody, and potential for resonance. Philosophy with the hammer must break as it wills sound; to each thing – and also to ourselves – we have to find a song and a dance.

However, let's not forget that later in Nietzsche's century, as the notion of art became entrenched in its metaphysical function, when both Hölderlin and Novalis were dead and Schlegel had converted to Catholicism, a voice was needed to rescue the project. This voice we know by the name of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a late early Romantic during a time when all easy solutions were exhausted, philosophically and also artistically, and when an idealisation of art was art's greatest enemy. During this time, innocence ceased to be an option and affirmation could only appear as violence.

The relationship between art and artistic research must thus also be tense. Artistic research cannot afford to idealise art as its origin but must challenge art when it fails to understand that it is not art that matters but a *just* relationship to each and every thing and its world. Artists who are researchers upset the history of art that is set up to control any possible future. As they break with this history, artistic researchers do things unacceptable to art since license is taken to experiment with that cherished history and to sing and dance against the grain. As they do this, artistic researchers must also contradict a philosophy that protects the impossibility of a science of the unique being, suggesting to art that it cannot enter the field of knowledge and that negativity is its name and silence is its virtue.

Michael Schwab

PART B

Radical epistemology has broken free from ontology. What the world can be is limited only by our ability to radicalise our *episteme*, not by what the world is. If we need ontology, it is only to project a basis in Being as the consequence of a type of thought that still is in need of such basis. Nietzsche's term 'Artisten-Metaphysik' reveals that from now on philosophy is in the service of art, providing an imagined framework for the kind of intellectual acrobatics that only artists can perform.

Radical epistemology is nihilism, whose 'nothing' expresses the absence of any ground other than what can be made here and now. Only through nihilism can artists 'experiment on the truth', finding out what else 'truth' can be. Thus, there can necessarily only be truth as multitudinous as the expression of the openness of experimental practice that is always plural. In fact, becoming multiple is one of the signs of radical epistemology. That which remains singular, flat, and homogenous will not (yet) have been opened up to knowledge.

Only experimental practice can create such fragmentary knowledge; or rather, within radical epistemology, fragmentary knowledge can only be achieved creatively. From now on, fragmentary knowledge is the only kind of knowledge to be had since all other knowledge shows itself subservient to belief systems external to practice – and, not to abolish but to take intellectual responsibility for our beliefs is what we need to do.

Each object of knowledge – each epistemic thing – is a fragment that challenges the ensemble of all other epistemic things every time it appears. It does so not because it invalidates what was previously epistemically achieved in a grand extension of history, but because it *is* a world. Doing justice to that world requires experimentation to continue. The only *just* representation of a world is its transformation. If experimentation was to finish or weaken, the epistemic thing that is a world disappears in a knowledge of a different kind – an enriched status quo of truth without consequence, the last man of technology, us as globalised, 'Western', and hermetic culture.

Experimentation keeps ontology suspended and epistemology radical only if it embraces the fragmentary. If before Nietzsche, in an early Romantic dream, the fragmentary could be imagined in some form of a higher world that is poetically removed from the world I live in, after Nietzsche, the fragmentary is first of all violence. This violence is a response to the late-Romantic sleep that harmed Romanticism's epistemic project. Philosophy with the hammer is a violent (art) criticism in search of survivors that no analysis of form could ever find. However, what looks like violence to most is love and respect to the fragmentary. It is affirmation – and so is the becoming-fragment of one's self.

Radical epistemology is fragmentary epistemology. The fragment is neither only *mythos* and whole nor only *logos* and dispersed; the fragment connects as opposition what otherwise simply remains opposed. Radical epistemology thus links the incomplete with the complete and also imbues any specific epistemic thing with the powers to make a world in which

everything else is implied. It is by virtue of the necessary multiplicity of these worlds that each fragment is not simply a piece of an otherwise whole structure; rather, the infinite order of possible worlds insures the fragmenticity of each fragment, giving radical epistemology power and scope to engage with meaning on the highest possible level, which is accessible only in the imaginary. Within the paradigm of the fragmentary, pushing for specificity and incompleteness on all levels is the difficult task of knowledge.

However, the fragmentary not only points beyond the epistemic thing towards a world, it also indicates that the fragment itself already has the status of such a world, since its completeness as fragment is of the same order as that of the completeness of its world. The heterogeneity of the fragment within radical epistemology corresponds to the impossibility of containing meaning in any single unit, the fragment included.

The same is true for history. While historical epistemology accepts the movement of the *episteme*, it does so through confluence and synchronisation, with the result that a future of knowledge becomes possible. Radical epistemology, on the other hand, radicalises the temporal movement of the *episteme* through asynchronous, temporal diversity, producing not only multiple futures but the possibility that those futures may, historically speaking, be in the past. Thus, epistemic things can change history not only by changing a future that sits on a stable past but also by changing the past itself and all futures that come with it. There is no single and simple passing of time, no truth-history in which we share a point of presence, since each epistemic thing has its own temporal horizon as past and future worlds, and so have I.

Radical epistemology seeks the fragmentary in a world that looks either rigid or broken, and whose parts do not speak of their potential to each be a world. This situation is stabilised by ontology, which is both a product of epistemic activity and its adversary. Thus, a radicalisation is made necessary that deconstructs and keeps at bay all attempts to ground knowledge in anything other than an epistemic practice that is experimental and which tries to detect the fragmentary status of whatever is given.

While everything is always a fragment, full and unique worlds are not always implied. Radical epistemology may be unable to deliver criteria for fragmentary knowledge, but it can offer operations and processes that may amount to practices and methodologies, which, heterogeneous in themselves, may not be nothing but still disappoint those who expect simple answers. Science, post-deconstruction, can only be artistic.

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