UNIVERSITY OF READING

WORK IN PROGRESS: FORM AS A WAY OF THINKING

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of his 1962 book *The Open Work*, in a chapter on 'Form as Social Commitment', Umberto Eco writes: 'Form must not be a vehicle for thought, it must be a way of thinking.'

Over ten chapters that alternate between 'theory' and 'practice', I attempt to articulate, elaborate and perform how this ethos plays out in a hybrid art/design practice today.

The 'theory' chapters discuss key aspects of forming-as-a-way-of-thinking. The first identifies those aspects of Eco's original argument most relevant to my extension of it here. The second shows how self-reflexivity in art can productively model such an approach, without becoming an end in itself. The third considers what it means to make and keep work 'in movement', adapting to and registering contingencies along the way. The fourth argues how this can make for markedly 'articulate' objects – work that refuses the crutch of supporting material, effectively captioning itself, and so embodying a particular sense of 'decency' and 'good manners'. The last chapter contends that a borderline art/design disposition is peculiarly suited to this way of working, and that the grey area between the two domains is fertile ground for it to play out right now.

Each 'practice' chapter recounts an idiosyncratic publishing project, usually produced together with David Reinfurt under the name Dexter Sinister in response to an open invitation from an art institution. The last of these took place during the final few months' work on the thesis, and as such, epitomizes the essence of the work advocated here: it is emphatically *in progress*.

The work draws freely from art, design, literature, and philosophy, with recurring reference to a core group comprising both seminal figures (e.g. T.W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, David Foster Wallace), marginal polymaths (e.g. Stefan Themerson, Anthony Froshaug, Richard Hollis) and close colleagues (e.g. Robin Kinross, Mike Sperlinger, Jan Verwoert). I also refer throughout to other art and artists past and present, with extended thoughts on a number of recent artworks to illustrate points made in the essays.

In 'Form as Social Commitment', Eco laid out an aesthetic theory to explain why he considers what he identifies as Open Works to be the most exemplary art of the era. Some 50 years on, I argue why the work described and performed here can be deemed just as 'authentic' – timely and pertinent – today.

‘The nature of uncarved blocks is how to describe what’s hard to describe.’[1]

‘I reckon it would take a year to write, and in a year I should pass through a rich variety of moods – so would the book – in that at least it would have some verisimilitude to life.’[2]

‘As soon as this is written it will be full of holes.’[3]

[1] Taoist proverb.

[2] Charles Pry, the protagonist of E.C. Large’s *Asleep in the Afternoon* [1938] (London: Hyphen Press, 2008).

[3] Germano Celant, ‘Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrila War’, *Flash Art*, no. 5, 1967.

Richard Hamilton, *How a Great Daily Organ is Turned Out* (1990), composite print from 20 plates

1: FORM AS A WAY OF THINKING

This first theory chapter is foremost an overview of Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*; a summary of its key ideas, and an expansion of those most relevant to the thesis at large. For Eco, 'authentic' art – by which he means timely, pertinent and exemplary – emerges when form is *a way of thinking* as opposed to a means of dressing already-held ideas. This, I argue, inevitably results in symbiotic form and content. Otherwise put, such symbiosis is a *consequence* of forming-as-thinking. I intend to articulate *and* demonstrate this idea here.

After briefly noting three pivotal aspects of Eco's book, I disambiguate a couple of recurring terms ('aesthetic', 'poetic'), then set up a rudimentary distinction between 'art' and 'design' in view of more convincingly merging them later on. Next, I compound Eco's sense of authentic by folding in a few commensurate concepts. The first is T.W. Adorno's account of the 'true' essay, itself based on a previous one by Georg Lukács. That I begin with a definition of 'essay' is no coincidence: it's at least partly intended to acknowledge my relatively haphazard approach – ranging freely across time, and referencing both seminal figures and close colleagues. Seth Price's ongoing essay-artwork *Dispersion* is offered as a recent case in point.

I move on to some related theories by Luigi Pareyson, Alain Badiou, and Walter Benjamin. Pareyson's notion of 'organic form' prioritizes *production* over representation or expression as art's essential 'forming action'. From this vantage, 'form' is synonymous with 'organism', every germane artwork inscribed with its own 'forming logic' (or 'life-force'), and the artist can be seen to proceed in a manner more or less faithful to this 'DNA'. Benjamin also advocates the primacy of production in his essay 'The Author as Producer', but to more explicitly social and political ends. Writers, he writes, ought not merely espouse a correct (i.e. Marxist) political alignment, but actively demonstrate a correct political *tendency* by actively working 'at the level of production', perpetually challenging orthodox forms of distribution. Both ideas chime with Alain Badiou's more recent notion of 'fidelity to an event', a promiscuous philosophical concept he applies across disciplines.

This leads on to the expansive aesthetic theory at the heart of *The Open Work*. Crudely put, Eco first describes a fundamental social dialectic in order to more clearly articulate an aesthetic equivalent. Namely: in the same manner that self-aware citizens reluctantly participate in society in view of transforming it, avant-garde artists necessarily engage with formal conventions in view of transforming *them*. This is as good as it gets, he concludes, and it's not that bad. Extending from this, the final idea elaborated from *The Open Work* here is that, *in a modern industrial context*, rather than focusing on, say, the decoration, representation or fictionalization of reality, progressive contemporary art operates *at the level of structure*, focusing on the *mechanisms* by which meaning is produced in a given discipline. Art turns self-conscious, and so self-reflexive.

Next, an interlude attempts to dissolve and arising contradiction. On one hand, I'm arguing for form that is 'intrinsically derived'; on the other, for form that is 'socially motivated'. But this is no paradox: the best work simply combines the two, an idea I demonstrate using one example from graphic design, and one from fine art – also in view of showing that the similarities between the two fields can be greater than the differences.

I end the chapter with a deeper consideration of the nature of this form/content synthesis, assembling previous attempts to deal with (or transcend) the duality by commentators such as Clement Greenberg and Susan Sontag. A quick synopsis of Bruno Latour's work serves as a postscript. Latour is similarly out to dissolve pernicious binary thinking (particularly the commonplace nature/culture divide), and it's instructive to consider the 'symbiosis' I continually advocate here in light of Latour's free-ranging sociology. This same strain runs throughout the present work: 'micro' aesthetic concerns are not only analogous to 'macro' ethical ones, but ideally *inform* them – and vice versa. In this back-and-forth between the world and the world of forms, we chase ways to handle the messy question of how to live.

1.1: KEY ASPECTS OF 'THE OPEN WORK'

My interest in *The Open Work* is three-fold:

– First, because it is a prescient account of art that is left radically incomplete or indeterminate in terms of form or meaning, in order to be *worked out* – iterated, interpreted or completed – by either the artist or performers during its production, by the audience during its reception, or both.

In a founding survey that became the book's opening chapter, 'The Poetics of the Open Work', Eco describes a number of recent pieces of avant-garde music by such as Stockhausen and Pousseur, whose scores are designed to foster some degree of improvisation during the performance. He then relates the literature of Kafka (whose narratives resist singular comprehension or interpretation), Joyce (whose *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are rife with multiple meanings, fragmentation, and cosmic chaos generally), and Mallarmé (whose unrealized *Livre* was an exercise in extreme multiplicity, conceived to be rearranged by the reader). He also acknowledges Calder's kinetic mobiles (in perpetual motion and so without fixed composition) and the plays of Brecht's Epic theatre (that typically relate a series of inconclusive facts for its audience to resolve).

In reaching back as far as Mallarmé, whose earliest seminal work dates from the 1860s, Eco suggests that the origins and development of open works are commensurate with modernist tendencies in art generally. He further points out that the essential ambiguity common to such an approach mirrors the vanguard theories of relativity, uncertainty, discontinuity and indeterminacy being explored by contemporaneous science, philosophy and mathematics. Art's equivalent 'openness' is inevitable, he says, because

> the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear.[1]

In other words, tentative aesthetics plausibly reflect tentative experience. (More on this later.)

– Second, because *The Open Work* is itself a prime example of the work it advocates. The short inaugural 'Poetics' piece spawned a number of offshoot essays written for various Italian journals and eventually assembled into a single volume. The book was republished several times, and on each occasion reconfigured – added to, amended, prefaced, and so on. The eventual English edition (1989) followed suit, incorporating, among other bits and pieces, some of Eco's later writing in order to emphasize the link between this early aesthetic theory and his more renowned work in semiology. As a modest palimpsest, then, the assembly of the book mirrors its argument, embodying why such a rolling snowball of thought is both timely and pertinent: self-critical, discursive, flexible, open-minded.

While I realize that this is by no means unusual or unique, i.e. that writing or any other artistic act almost always involves some kind of working-itself-out by some form of thinking-in-action, to forge a concrete opinion or more ineffable aesthetic – in both cases, a *gesture* – along the way, I claim only that *The Open Work* is *to an unusual degree both* about and an example of this process; subject and object are one and the same. It practices what it preaches, and is all the more convincing for doing so.

– Third, *The Open Work* is foundational for me because of the way in which Eco explicitly and convincingly accounts for what he calls the 'authenticity' of such Open Work by reverse-engineering an aesthetic theory to support his case. Eco's 'authentic' means something like 'timely pertinence'. He argues that the only truly apposite work is that which struggles half-blindly against impotent formal conventions and, in doing so, generates newly relevant ones. This is, of course, the definitive vocation

[1] Eco, op. cit., p. 157.

of any artistic avant-garde,[2] not to be mistaken for adolescent posturing (killing fathers for the sake of killing fathers) but more righteously conceived as an attempt to supersede forms that have lost or are losing their perceptive and affective power.

For Eco, the work that emerges from this struggle is exemplary to the extent that it fosters our ability to cognitively apprehend the current cultural condition, ideally in view of positively affecting it. The question of aesthetic authenticity is therefore a question of *more or less* appropriately and so *more or less* meaningfully refracting lived experience by working on forms. The middle third of the present chapter summarizes this aesthetic theory, as a foundation on which to build the rest of the thesis.

But first, some upfront clarifications:

1.2: GLOSSARY: AESTHETIC, POETIC, ART, DESIGN

Eco's assertion that 'form must be a way of thinking' is an *aesthetic principle* constituent of a *poetics*. These terms require a little elaboration.

By 'aesthetic', I mean the form by which an idea is communicated graphically or verbally, how it *comes across*. This is consistent with Eco's use of the term, as clarified by David Robey in his introduction to the English edition. Robey notes that much of the book is founded on Eco's 'general aesthetic theory',[3] which is, in turn, an extension of his mentor Luigi Pareyson's notion of 'organic form' (particularly his insistence that it is the *modo di formare* – the 'way of forming' – that constitutes the aesthetic essence of an artwork). Eco stresses this *active* aspect of 'aesthetic', synonymous with Nicholas Bourriaud's definition of style as 'the movement of a work, its trajectory'.[4] Robey also draws attention to Eco's use of the term 'aesthetic idiolect', which is especially telling inasmuch as 'idiolect' means 'an individual's speech pattern', and so implies a kind of *native* particularity – a subjective sensibility or temperament.

Trailing Eco again, by 'poetics' I mean a set of more or less explicit intentions, a drive, approach or attitude. This is derived from *poetica*, 'a work's artistic purpose', and conceived of as a conscious means, a plan of action or set of working principles (as in Aristotle's *Poetics*: 'a treatise or collection of notes') towards an anticipated end – even though that 'end' may be indeterminate, vague or abstract. Certainly the 'purpose' of artistic work is ambiguous in Eco's account, inasmuch as he advocates a necessary and desirable 'blindness' rather than a projected outcome. In other words, Eco's sense of purpose is markedly front-loaded – a drive, push or reach, more diving board than landing pad. It is thus better conceived of as purpos*ive*, which is to say in view of a nominal end congruent with Kant's well-known description of nature's design as 'purposiveness without purpose'; form that suggests *some kind of utility*, however phantom.[5]

'An aesthetic principle constituent of a poetics' is thus conceived as the program that determines how form takes shape in its appeal to the senses. This implies a value judgment: at least a critical measure (what makes for 'good work'?), at most an ethical code (what sort of 'good' does this work do?).

[2] Given that the term is two or three times *passé* today, I'll generally avoid 'avant-garde', apart from when referring to or quoting someone else's use in a more innocent context. Eco uses it without any such hesitation, though in a later article on 'The Death of the Gruppo '63' (chapter 9 in the English edition of *The Open Work*) he wrote: 'now that Samuel Beckett has had the Stockholm treatment, the word "Avant-garde" can hardly keep its meaning.' That said, I always mean to at least *imply* a contemporary avant-garde, which is to say I agree with Eco's assertion that authentic work is necessarily – if often inadvertently – topical, that it manifests the zeitgeist, etc.

[3] Eco, op. cit., p. xiii.

[4] Bourriaud's line is itself a variation on a maxim proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: 'The style of a thought is its movement.' See: Bourriaud, op. cit., p. 114.

[5] Given that fine art since, say, Duchamp is a fundamentally ambiguous occupation anyway, this tenuous sense is already implied in that qualifying 'artistic' of 'artistic purpose'.

A further signal appeal of *The Open Work* is precisely that it alludes to a general 'work' rather than the end product of a specific discipline – and by implication, a polymathic *working ethos*. In this sense too, then, Eco's thesis is itself conspicuously 'open' from the outset. Although the present text sets out from aesthetic theory, it deliberately circumscribes influences and examples from across the liberal arts. In doing so, I mean to show that the working ethos I'm after grasping applies across disciplines – in my particular case, to design as much as art. Even though art and design traditionally proceed from different premises, this approach is commensurably manifest in the products of both practices.

As mentioned, Eco spends a large part of *The Open Work* making a case for the 'authenticity' of avant-garde art. The nearest semantic neighbours from a century of design discourse tend to be even more vague and insipid ('good', 'honest', 'unaffected'), but graphic design can be conceived of as more or less authentic in a sense wholly consistent with Eco's articulation, and in due course I'll be as precise about what makes this 'good' good as Eco is in authenticating his 'authentic'. For now, it's enough to say that I consider design a kind of socialized art, and though I'll later posit that the working ethos I want to articulate is particularly apparent in the grey area *between* art and design, it's worth acknowledging some rudimentary distinctions at the outset in order to know exactly what's being merged. To paraphrase British art critic J.J. Charlesworth, cross-disciplinarity is meaningless without reference to a primary set of discrete disciplinary foundations.[6] That said, bear in mind when reading the following two paragraphs that I'm temporarily attempting to keep the fields at arm's length primarily for the sake of clarity at the outset.[7] I'll proceed by tentative distinction rather than hard definition.

Fundamentally, both art and design involve the manipulation of sensory phenomena. From there they diverge:

Relatively speaking, art *tends towards* the speculative creation of new forms, and is thus founded on more or less indefinite intentions and outcomes (though often produced for specific audiences, clients, spaces and contexts). It is typically autonomous, meaning without *ostensible* purpose in the obvious sense, and strongly marked by a relatively long tradition of history and theory (i.e. Art History) that typically remains focused on the singular, 'auratic' art object, latterly supplemented by broader immaterial concepts, experiences and relations. The domain is relatively hermetic and remains foremost associated with subjectivity, catharsis, poetry, etc.

Graphic design, on the other hand, *tends towards* the meaningful rearrangement of existing forms, founded on more or less definite intentions and outcomes, generally produced for specific audiences, clients, spaces, and contexts. It is typically tied to commerce (i.e. the serial or mass production of goods and services). As such, it has a relatively short history, beginning only around the end of the industrial revolution, and so lacks the sustained intellectual inheritance of Art History. Due to its ties with industry, graphic design has tended to be more immediately and emphatically affected by vanguard technologies. The domain is *comparatively* 'social', and more closely associated with objectivity, functionality, science, etc.

So when I say design can be conceived of as a 'socialized art', I mean only that it is oriented more towards reception than creation. But let's not get hung up on definitions. (To paraphrase 'cabinetmaker, designer, poet, and teacher' Norman Potter, people often seem to be far more concerned with their job title than what they actually do.)

[6] J.J. Charlesworth, 'Crisis at the ICA: Ekow Eshun's Experiment in Deinstitutionalisation', *Mute*, vol. 2, no. 15, 2010.

[7] In his 2007 essay 'The Surface of Design', Jacques Rancière draws a useful comparison between the poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the industrial designer Peter Behrens. Rancière thinks the distinction between fine and applied art has been historically exaggerated; more pointedly, he says, both work on 'surfaces' in the general public domain of 'sensibility'. See: Jacques Rancière, 'The Surface of Design', *The Future of the Image* [2003, French] (London: Verso, 2007).

1.3: THE 'TRUE' ESSAY

The Open Work describes, embodies and promotes a positively precarious disposition, which is as decent a definition as any of the essay form as such. Essay literally means 'attempt', which implies reaching beyond one's knowledge, understanding or ability, and, to a slightly lesser degree, a making-it-up-as-you-go-along. It is thus distinct from the journalistic article, report or profile, which are all essentially narrative accumulations of facts. (Naturally, the categories aren't watertight.)

According to T.W. Adorno's essay 'The Essay as Form' (1958),[8] itself based on Georg Lukács' 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay' (1910),[9] an essay is never started from scratch or written in a vacuum. Rather, it assimilates existing material, drawing together 'culturally pre-determined objects' that through the act of writing are reconfigured and transformed into a new entity. According to Adorno, the success of this compound – the essay's plausibility and authority – hinges on how convincingly its constituent parts hang together, the extent to which they are mutually supportive. The effective essay thus *forges its own logic* and then *corresponds to it*. For Lukács, this amounts to writing into existence a 'truth' inasmuch as it expresses a 'newly-formed essence' without prior equivalent.

Adorno expands: the 'true' essayist never aims at abstract absolutes, but remains grounded in concrete contingencies. 'Not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory … rather, to make the transitory eternal.' This freewheeling spirit, he continues, originated in Kant, who supplanted Western philosophy's strictures of verbal definition, a sedimentary process ('One can only seek truth if one discovers fundamental principles and builds on them'[10]), with a *line of inquiry*, a *trajectory of thought*. Kant's *Critiques* ushered in the spirit of critical reason, an unprecedentedly self-conscious paradigm that, contrary to the staunch scientific attitude that insists stubbornly on 'the pre-critical job of definition', sought 'an understanding of concepts as part of the process in which they are temporarily embodied.'[11] And precisely because this undertaking is always in the midst of things, it is necessarily incomplete, and so always 'at risk'. Adorno summarizes:

> Just as [empirical education] remains exposed to error, so does the essay as form; it must pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience by the lack of security, a lack which the norm of established thought fears like death (...) It is not so much that the essay ignores indisputable certainty, as that it abrogates the ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress.[12]

Moreoever, he writes, the path of such progress is mysteriously 'hidden to the essay itself', and this desire to make sense – quite literally to build meaning – its driving force. The *essayer* thus pursues the looping logic of 'autopoiesis', which means self-generating, self-sustaining. In writing this newly peculiar sense into existence, the essayist as exemplary Open Worker labours to crystallize those mutually supporting parts. According to Adorno, this 'expresses the utopian intention' by alluding to a social equivalent; namely, the notion of a mutually supportive community, of communality.

Writing some 40 years on from Eco in one of the multiple (and conspicuously open) iterations of his essay-artwork 'Dispersion' since 2002, contemporary New York-based artist Seth Price makes much the same claim – or excuse – as Eco, that

[8] T.W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form' [1958, German], *New German Critique*, no. 32, Spring/Summer, 1984.

[9] Georg Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper' [1910, German], *Soul and Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).

[10] Jack M. Balkin quoted in: Céline Condorelli, *Support Structures* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), p. 21, fn. 17.

[11] Both Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', op. cit.

[12] Ibid., p. 161 (my italics).

> since one can only adopt the degree of precision appropriate to the subject, this essay is written in a provisional and exploratory spirit [and as such] may itself be a disjointed series of naive propositions lacking a thesis.[13]

Since the late 1990s, Price has worked across the entire spectrum of contemporary art, often producing works that are emphatically analogue or emphatically digital, and tend to inscribe their particular moment in media history. One typically self-consciously 'signature' series comprises vacuum-formed wall pieces that fossilize in plastic some piece of clothing from a distinct moment in fashion (e.g. a 1980s bomber jacket) alongside the artist's name. Price has also produced films, videos, paintings, records, mixtapes, clothing, books, and other printed matter.

'Dispersion' has been dispersed in numerous formats – published as a printed booklet, channelled via numerous other books and magazines, and circulating as a freely downloadable PDF. In it, Price proposes ways of working outside the circumscribed confines of the art world by focusing on (or at least prioritizing) forms of distribution over forms of production. He posits that *how* a piece of work circulates can be as important as *what* circulates, and that in a saturated and neutered art system based on commodity exchange, this How is a more potent point of focus right now. 'The art system usually corrals errant works,' he states, 'but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?'[14]

Because Price also produces high-profile commodity-artworks himself, 'Dispersion' has since served, perhaps inadvertently, as a de facto manifesto – 'a stand-in for the artist himself', according to critic Tim Griffin, who also notes that Price's work is then obliged to measure up to his own public call for constructive ways of operating outside the critical mass.[15] This idea of a self-imposed mandate seems a commendably awkward way of raising the stakes against oneself: *can I answer to my own critique?*

Where Eco wrote in praise of openness over fixity in *The Open Work*, Price now champions slowness over speed. Slow art, he says, 'works against all of our prevailing urges and requirements' based on the contemporary mandate of *don't stop don't stop don't stop*. He recalls the rear-guard tactics of Duchamp, who famously cultivated the property of 'delay' via a series of enigmatic deferrals designed to 'return the investment with massive interest.' Price seeks analogous brakes in the backwaters of communication that could circumvent the dominant circuit of an art market that reflexively absorbs and domesticates any sting of topicality.[16] 'Moving *with* the times places you in a blind spot', he continues, because 'if you're part of the general tenor it's hard to add a dissonant note.' This general tenor was once disparaged as 'scene art' by Clement Greenberg, who meant work that merely goes through whatever motions are currently in vogue. Considering that Price's very portable document format seems to have been widely read – and influential – in the decade since its release, and so at the very least against the general tenor of the glut of art writing that disappears without impact, 'Dispersion' can also be seen as duplicating *The Open Work* in that it likewise performs its point.

Something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, then, Price's essay has proliferated not only in terms of numbers and circulation, but also across his larger body of work. Bits and pieces of the palimpsest have been variously silkscreened onto those vacuum-formed wall pieces, or written into the narrative of his video lecture *Redistribution*.[17] Considered as a whole, in fact, Price's practice is markedly essayistic.

[13] Seth Price, 'Dispersion', 2001–, http://www.distributedhistory.com (unpaginated).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Tim Griffin, 'The Personal Effects of Seth Price', *Artforum*, Summer 2008.

[16] The examples in 'Dispersion' include a hypothetical science fiction novel as briefly postulated in the short-lived art theory journal *The Fox*, mixtape cassettes such as those circulated as works by Price himself, and Jorge Pardo's own-home-as-exhibition, *4166 Sea View Lane* as a singular instance of a genuinely *heterotopic* artwork, simultaneously open *and* closed to the public while pointing to the paradox.

[17] See §7.6.

Dispersion can be considered an update of *The Open Work* in one further sense: in frankly surveying the contemporary scene, both works attempt to articulate it in order to move; in order to supersede it.

1.4: THE ETHICS OF ORGANIC ART

As distinct from science, mathematics and philosophy, writes Eco, art specifically 'knows the world through its own formative structures'. It can be thus considered 'intelligence in form'[18] – an intelligence that participates in the world (interprets it, affects it) by arranging and organizing those forms. Eco's thinking here derives from – and extends – his mentor Luigi Pareyson's theory of 'formativity' outlined in the seventh chapter of *The Open Work*, 'Form and Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson's Aesthetics'. It opens with this abstract:

> To the idealistic notion of art as vision, Pareyson's theory of formativity opposes the concept of art as *form*, in which the term 'form' means organism, formed physicality with a life of its own, harmoniously balanced and governed by its own laws; and to the concept of *expression*, it opposes that of *production* as forming action.[19]

The 'idealistic notion of art as vision' in the opening clause refers to the concept of 'pure intuition' contemporaneously popularized by Benedetto Croce in his 1912 lecture series and later publication, *The Essence of Aesthetic*.[20] Croce unequivocally posits internal subjective 'feeling' as the essence of art, which by implication has nothing to do with morality or knowledge, and so is categorically devoid of any social impetus or obligation. (Significantly, perhaps, this conception was dominant in Italy throughout the Fascist period.)

Contra Croce, then, Eco assumes the task of elucidating the obscure ethics inherent in Pareyson's 'formativity'. Morality is entwined with artistic action, he writes, not as a set of binding laws, but as a commitment, an attitude, a mission. Duty compels the duly committed artist to pursue the guiding principles suggested by an initial 'cue' or 'germ' of an idea, which is gradually realized in a piece of work as it becomes progressively autonomous.[21] This cue or germ – a good idea in advance of its realization, or aesthetic precognition – is 'the pretext, the goal, the lure, which engages consciousness in formal processes of transformation.'[22] This is the sense in which every piece of work is 'self-governing', which in turn implies a cybernetic process of trial-and-error, 'from the vague realm of aspiration to a concrete awareness of the possibilities of the material at his disposal.'[23]

In a conversational struggle to distinguish between mere 'illustration' (i.e. hackwork) and superior 'invention' (i.e. art), Francis Bacon once described this 'life' as characterized by minimal caution and surplus instinct:

> What has never yet been analysed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life completely of its own. It lives on its own like the image one's

[18] Eco, op. cit., p. 144.

[19] Ibid., p. 158.

[20] Ibid., p. ix, fn. 2.

[21] 'Autonomous' here meaning 'that which is free, but gives a law to itself', a definition drawn from: Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 70.

[22] Susan Sontag, 'On Style', *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), pp. 33–4.

[23] Ibid.

> trying to trap; it lives on its own and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly.[24]

This is key: both the object-under-scrutiny and the subject-of-capture are equivalent, sovereign entities, and both are marked by blatant idiosyncrasy.

It follows from all this that, in Pareyson's view, the artist ought not be conceived as a genius-seer who summons fully formed revelations, but a producer who realizes-in-action. The same idea was advocated around the same time by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Author as Producer' (1936), and later elaborated with endless nuance in T.W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (posthumously published in 1970). For Benjamin and Adorno, as for Pareyson and Eco, artistic creation is not merely or primarily a mental phenomenon conjured in the mind of the maker, but rather a plastic process in which a given medium is acted upon, manipulated and transformed. This is by no means an arbitrary procedure; on the contrary, it requires a *correct* response to the unfolding work – and here is the first inkling of the 'ethics' that underpin Eco's conception of authenticity.

The development of any piece of work obviously involves making choices – a platitude that art historian Thierry de Duve has formulated as follows: 'If the word art means making, and if making means choosing, then we are left to draw the most general conclusion possible: art means choosing.'[25] De Duve is in fact paraphrasing Marcel Duchamp, who, in a conversation about his readymades, proclaimed that

> The word 'art', etymologically speaking, means to make (...) Now what is making? Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red (...) choosing the place to put it on the canvas, it's always choosing (...) Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting.[26]

The choice implied by Pareyson, however, is not simply synonymous with 'preference', which implies something subjective and superfluous. Crucially, it *derives from* the work-in-progress. This kind of 'choice' is integral, ingrained, and so in some sense pre-ordained. Hence the decisions made along the way of the work can be plausibly conceived of as more or less *faithful* to principles immanent in the emerging work.

Pareyson calls it 'formativity,' and the idea is analogous to what contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou calls 'fidelity to the event'. The 'event' in this case is, again, something like the founding 'germ', 'cue', or 'intuition' of an idea in advance of its realization as a piece of work. According to Badiou's very particular ontology, as set out in such as *Being and Event* (1988),[27] philosophical thinking 'assembles truth' relative to one of four fundamental 'conditions': Science, Politics, Love, and Art. Philosophy is thus conceived as a meta-domain that only exists in counterpoint to these conditions, and the sole means of refracting their respective truths is by *reflecting on* them via what he calls 'truth procedures'. Crucially, these procedures are always timely and specific. Truth is gleaned in action and never hoarded into doctrine – an emphatically non-axiomatic philosophy.

Moreover, each of Badiou's four conditions manifests a discrete and specific *type* of truth which – to continue using his terms – is revealed only when an 'event' ruptures an otherwise indiscernible situation, and this rupture is pointed at (or 'named'). In other words, when someone or something registers an unprecedented way of perceiving the world, and so instigates a *potential* paradigm shift in terms of how we think about things. These events occur at all levels, from minor quotidian happenings to major structural shifts, both personal (a love affair) and public (a social revolution). The determining

[24] Quoted in: Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2010), p. 79.

[25] Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 162.

[26] Ibid., p. 161.

[27] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* [1988, French] (New York: Continuum, 2005).

factor is simply that the event exceeds existing value systems; there is no way to immediately judge, contain or otherwise 'domesticate' it. And precisely because such an event is no longer commensurate with any existing measure, it may be pursued with greater or lesser fidelity relative only to itself – that is, to the essence of the original rupture.

Badiou discusses the 'truth procedures' specific to the Art condition in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (1988). 'Inaesthetic' is his term for the true art event inasmuch as it contradicts existing aesthetic conventions, something like 'an unprecedented creative idea'.[28] It bears repeating that for Badiou the truth procedure is always strictly *a* procedure – which is to say a one-off, occurring in the moment and contingent on the specifics of a given situation. (Badiou calls it 'generic'.) Hence it is futile to conceive of a general rule to *validate* the fidelity; it is possible only to sketch an overarching concept as a frame through which to consider each new case.[29]

Both Badiou's fidelity-to-an-event and Pareyson's organic formativity conjure the promiscuous metaphor of DNA, obligatory shorthand for all contemporary phenomena involving some kind of immanent anticipatory code. To discover the *legitimate* form of a given piece of work is to properly realize a trajectory according to a sovereign law that is *already inscribed* – a law that guides and validates those decisions made by the duly attuned artist along the way. Consider this in light of the following definition of ethics by the German critic Jan Verwoert:

> [While] Morals are the set of values which a society and those who rule it declare to be binding for all that live in that society (...) Ethics is about the attitude to life that is immanent to – and manifests itself through – the particular way people live their life. Your ethical principles reveal themselves in the particular style of how you go about what you do. In art and intellectual discourse, style is ethos and ethos style.[30]

As an active Marxist, Walter Benjamin was committed to the notion that the technologies of manufacture – the 'means of production' – ought to be owned by the people who operate them. In 'The Author as Producer' (1934),[31] rather than the usual focus on factories and workers, he considers the same idea in view of a socially committed art. Writing and the other arts, he writes, are always grounded in social structures such as educational institutions and publishing networks, and though the socially-conscious and politically-engaged intellectual may query how his (or anyone else's) work stands in relation *to* these structures, this is not enough; he needs to query rather how it stands *in* them. Benjamin demands that intellectuals refrain from merely adopting political 'content' and propagating an ideological cause, and instead work to transform *the root-level means by which their work is produced and circulated*. This approach, he concludes, will inevitably manifest what he deems to be a 'correct' political tendency.

Benjamin's first case study in 'The Author as Producer' is the Soviet writer Sergei Tretiakov, who lived and worked on an agricultural commune for extended periods before writing his experiences up into a novel. He is offered as an exemplary 'operative writer', who actively implicated himself in the matter at hand, as opposed to the common hack who merely observes and 'gives information'.

[28] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* [1998, French] (Stanford University Press, 2004).

[29] Similarly, Kant claims that the artist 'does not himself know how the ideas for [the work] have entered into his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure, or methodically, and communicate the same to others in such precepts as would put them in a position to produce similar products.' For Kant, the 'rule' that verifies art 'cannot be set down in a formula [...] for then the judgment upon the beautiful would be determinable according to concepts. Rather the rule must be gathered from the performance, i.e. from the product [...] a model [...] not for imitation but for following.' Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* [1790] (Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 171.

[30] Jan Verwoert, 'Politics Must be Invented', *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 103.

[31] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' [1934, German], *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969).