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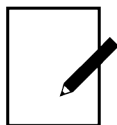
to complete
Sketching

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‘If one has little, then one receives, and if one has much, then one knows confusion.’ - **Laozi**¹

‘To treat not just every person, but even every thing, as if it were an end in itself - that would be a cosmic ethic.’ - **Georg Simmel**²

1: Jullien, 2009. p.67, 2: Simmel, 2010, p. 171

I. The sketch is effect. Not the just the line, nor the materiality or skill but the effect it produces seems to be at the center of what the term sketch means. In the first chapter *Theory of the Sketch* of the book *The Great Image has no Form*, François Jullien tries to unlock this term for the Western reader. After explaining the historical development of the sketch in Europe, he goes on describing the term as how the literati painters¹ in ancient China would have understood it. Here it goes much further than just art theory, and it seems to be a philosophy for life. A holistic view rooted in taoïsme with its great masters like Laozi and Zhuangzi. It seems to be a completely different angel on the human condition, than how a Westerner would understand it. Human condition being the essential aspects of life, such as birth, growth and death, and the view of a human being on life, which gives those events meaning. Although it really excites me to read Jullien's text, it is probably because of this different angel on the human condition that I find it still hard to fully grasp it. Precisely because there seems to be not just a difference in meaning and terms between Chinese- and Western thought, but also a whole different context for existence. And with that comes a different kind of language as well. With this essay I want to make an attempt in trying to create a context for the idea of effect from a Western perspective. I hope to make the term fully sound, by not just dissecting the term and constructing it again but also by paying attention to the language that Jullien used in describe the term.

The effect as Jullien describes it is obviously not an object, but can be recognized by its qualities. It is that what is still at work, and is always working (Jullien, 2009, p.69). That what makes the seemingly empty, full(p.67). It is there before things are divided (p.66). It deploys on its own (p.67). All this sounds like a phenomenon in nature. And it would have been, were it not that the effect flows from the arrangements made beforehand. It is like a seed planted and cared for, that sprouts. The one

1. Literati painting refers to the Southern School, opposed to the Northern school. Not a geographical distinction but one of style and position. The Northern school were the professional and formal painters. The Southern school were or retired painters or never profesional painters. The Southern school is more of a umbrella term for the 'free' painters. (wikipedia: Southern School, 2020)

making these arrangements is the master. After years of practising as a student, and after proving to have mastered the techniques and skills, the master sets the student free. Now being a master himself, he has to surpass all his knowledge in order to let the effect flow. 'Surpassing' is not just another technique, which is learned with a steady hand for example, but is talked about in a different language. The word spirit stands out in this regard. This word, translated in different languages as *geest*, *esprit*, mind, *geist*, leads us directly to the heart of the tension, for it seems to escape all is descriptions. Jullien (2009, p.72) talks about it in the following quote:

When you wish to paint all the way but do not dare, that is nothing more than childishness. But when someone who has achieved mastery of his art and has reached his spiritual peak "lets the spirit pass of it self through the single variation of pale and dark" and when "the spirit reaches all the way" if "he does not paint all the way", it is "perfect.

Spirit is connected to the achieved mastery, and mastery means a spiritual peak, where one can let it paint while painting with his whole being. For a Westerner this does not make much sense. Or you possess the skill and you are able or you lack it and you are not. Of course you can be lucky and achieve it now and then. But how can it be that you do and don't do at the same time? Still, there is a equivalent of this idea from a Western thinker. I think, if Kant would have read this, he would say: 'Ah, you are talking about the genius with his natural talent. We are talking about the same thing'. And if you would read Kant's *Critique of Judgement* you would almost agree with him. Also the genius surpasses the mechanical (Kant, 1928, p.165), all the technique's, the logic, the foreseeable, and is able to give soul to his work (p.175). This is because he happened to be gifted with talent by nature. The genius-product comes without fixed rule, not from imitation, it is always original, structured by the mechanism of a hidden subjective rule, that produces something that can serve as goal for others (p.171). It is interesting that also with the genius and his talent, that was escapes, is what makes it full. The soul of the product somehow escapes. Just as with the 'not painting but still painting all the way'. The similarities between the two ideas are striking but do not solve the differences. And this is because they are

not just different terms, with a different connotation. It seems that both ideas do exist in different dimensions.

Kant is the kind of philosopher where you can grab a piece of paper and make a diagram out of the terms he uses. And every time you can add a term into a category. Until everything has its position by being defined positive and opposed to other terms. In this way Kant also wants to pinpoint the exact area for soul, by dividing and opposing it to areas that are different. This urge to make a 'thing' of everything is the main objection Georg Simmel makes in his essay *The Law of the Individual* to Kant's way of defining. Simmel (2010, p.111) says: 'The forging of such a 'thing' seems to be the result of a very primitive spiritual function that for the lack of immediate description we call the collaboration of differences and connections'.

Ironical it is that Kant's genius never really becomes a thing because it never becomes spatial. The absence of the spiritual function, to move, means no chance to change. No possibility to deal with a spatial 'thing' like effect. Kant's genius is like someone living in a 2D world experiencing a 3D object. The 2D logic can never give a satisfying explanation for the 3D phenomena, that is why it is doomed to stay the supernatural gift. And the genius, doomed to be genius, has to deal with it.

This supernatural gift, or in other words talent, does not care about perception. Whether you conceive it as talent or not, does not change the fact it is talent. This of course makes the term talent and genius more complicated, because our perception plays a huge role in daily life. I am not going to take your word for it, if I can not perceive it. And perception precisely being the 'thing' that liberates the thing from being a thing. Because even if the visual may be original, and the language is filled with words describing the 'escape', the movement, it still can be mechanical. Be without play, not a real adventure into the unknown. Not quite so genius, but more like Newton (Kant, 1928, p.179). Amazingly bright but staying within the realm of what can be learned. If that is even a correct distinction. How do we know that Newton did not make a leap of faith to come to his theories? That he did not create a genius-product in the process, only to take it back into the field of logic afterwards? Just as a

mass production object, like a plastic chair, can trigger the perception in, who seems to be, just a 'regular guy' that is just not stopping to vibrate between positive and negative. Becoming more subtle and complex beyond being graspable; like how you throw a marble on a stone floor. First it bounces back high enough to see the movement. But just before it lays still, there is the movement of small vibrations, sometimes creating a high tone, which is barely distinguishable from the static. In that sense it is impossible to pinpoint someone a genius, you can have only the sense someone is. And it is this sense that make the term genius misplaced, after all. The term genius derives after a chain of divisions: imagination opposed to rational thinking, art opposed to nature, mechanical opposed to original, play opposed to function, genius opposed to craftsman. To suddenly have a term as genius, that over arches the distinction between art and nature, feels forced. Not being completely rational anymore, not completely positive but muddy and moving; and ultimately escaping our binary understanding.

Where Kant (1928, p.169) speaks about opposition between genius and the spirit of imitation, would the literati painter see no opposition. Because when a literati painter wants to depict a tree, it would not be about an original image coming from an individual experience. Much more it would be that the literati painter would try to grasp the tree. By trying to understand the being of the tree. In other words the tao² of the tree. Tao suggest there is a way which you can follow. Not by being a genius, who figured it out. But by being willing to be led, which asks for a non-preoccupied attitude, so you can be led. The relation between mastery and being able to make art is, beside having know-how about materials and techniques to produces, a matter of consciousness. Being aware of the cognitive aspect, reading the information of the situation. And the meta-cognitive aspect, knowing your part in this situation. Being aware of you skills, your cognition, and how to stimulate but not over stretch the potential present in the given situation. Where Kant's genius really wants to become a 'thing' it becomes static

2. Tao is a Chinese word and metaphysical concept, that signifies 'way', 'path', 'route'. The Tao Te Ching, written by Laozi says: 'The essential of the tao is that it can not be expressed. If they think they can express it, it is not tao'. (Wikipedia: Tao, 2020)

and does not leave the piece of paper. It can not recognize as Simmel (2010, p.111) says 'the world objectively as a continuum with absolute interaction of all elements, whose purely natural-law concatenations and sequences know nothing of division into individual 'things'.

The genius will never become a master. Never will he reaches his spiritual peak and be set free. Simmel would argue that this is because there is one perspective missing on the phenomenon of effect. Effect is not just an aesthetic phenomenon but also an ethical one. Who is the one that decides that effect is effect after all? That it is good. Everyone would agree it can not be a person setting the rule for others. That would be just another edition to the mechanical. Also Kant (1928, p.168) argues that the genius works by his own subjective rule. Just the genius product sets the standard which can be followed but never would produce an other genius product. This does not mean that the genius is free. He may be free from manmade law but is even more bound to the law of Nature, for it is his talent given by Nature, that gives him the ability to make products with soul in the first place. Simmel argues that the judgement form the outside, in this case Nature, is the first division of many, and separates us from actual life as we experience it. The objects in life we experiences as actually have a certain absolutnes for us, Simmel says (2010, p.99). He goes on decribing that this does not mean they are more objective but that we are most used to experience them in that way and order. If we would be able to poke through the actual-conception of the object, we would see it is just another from, as is religious, ethical, imaginatively, aesthetical and so on, in which we apprehend content. The one object we always experience, and we in no other way can experience as actual, is our own life. Although we can look at our own life through different lenses, it will always at the same time be actual as well. But there is another form that shares this position with the actual, namely the Ought. Ought is not just a judgement on what we experience as actual. But it is a form, as primal as actual, in which we experience life, constituting of hopes, drives, ethics, anti-ethics and aesthetic demands. All present at the same time, what makes the Ought as direct and dualistic as it is. The Ought as the Ideal, and our ideals, as Sin and as the Good. A muddy thing that is impossible to get a clear view on. Also because it constantly produces the ongoing stream of life.

If we see the Ought as merely ethical, it becomes unbridgeable divided from the actual, the psychological side of life. This is the critique from Simmel on Kant's way of creating the idea of duty only in the rational part of the individual. In that way separating it from the sensuous, and there by splitting the individual up. Because of this splitting Kant has to place wherever the command comes from outside the individual. For reason can not be its own ground, life or effect. Reason can not escape itself. Another way to put it, is that there needs to be a space. Kant creates this space by creating an outside for the individual. Simmel (2010, p.100) argues that this space already exists within the individual as an actual and an Ought. In a binary world things are there or are not there. In a spatial world gradation is possible. Ought is not just absence and actual is not just presence. There is a vivid understanding that we can only experience life by the forms it creates, but that life only can be life if it leaves these forms behind at the same time. If we talk about our experienced life, Ought can not be outside or against it for it is the fulfilment of life. Ought is the way life becomes aware of itself.

With the Ought not being the final judgement from outside of the individual, but an intrinsic part of our self-consciousness, constituting a spiritual self, we are freed from making final judgments and 'things' out of the objects that surrounds us. Than we can, as Simmel (2010, p. 171) says: '...treat not just every person, but even every thing, as if it were an end in itself - that would be a cosmic ethic'. Cosmic, the character of universality, is needed for a law to be a law. A law can not be individual, it has to be non-individual, in order to be able to confront the individual. If everyone and everything can be treated as endless in itself, it means it goes beyond usable, beyond purpose. Even beyond pure aesthetical, it becomes a way of receiving it all by having little.

II. I want to go back to the idea of making a sketch, in the hope that this concrete example can form a window upon the potential of this idea for a different view on the human condition. When I have a piece of paper in front of me, white, often A4-size, and a graphite pencil in my hand, I ask myself what shall I draw? Beside deciding on a starting point for the drawing, I unconsciously, also decide on an endpoint for the drawing, from where the judgement will come, whether the drawing succeeded.

Sometimes I try to avoid this moment by just making some quick scratches but that is just postponing the moment. But maybe postponing can be more than just a strategy of avoiding, and be the attitude coming from a self-consciousness and awareness of the relation of the self with the surrounding. I realize the mood I am in will affect the outcome of the drawing. How much focus do I have at the moment? What are the thoughts in my head that keep me busy? Why is the muscle in my right arm slightly vibrating? Maybe the chair I sit on is a bit too low. The bright sun, shedding light abundantly from a window behind me on the white paper, will certainly make the graphite stains shimmer. Shimmer through the wax and despite the baked clay, the three ingredients the pencil I hold contain. The paper I use is just a A4 printing paper, 80 grams, bleached and willingly accepting all kinds of stains made on it. Good enough to contain a maybe-future-masterwork? I just keep on trying to postpone that question, in the believe it is a false, 2D theory. Just bones without the flesh. I try not to be the genius. I will try to make an attempt to express, through thoughts, skill and awareness of the whole situation, that what vibrates between the actual and the Ought, and goes unseen by people who focus only on the actual.

And if I feel content with a drawing, when I do not want to work on it anymore, I notice I keep looking at it. It seems to make connections with other parts of my life I did not intend. With the scribbles of my little nephew for example or the kitchen garden of my neighbour. Before things are divided. It reminds me of the divisions I made, unconsciously and a while ago already, but those were never really there. It just keeps on flowing, the lines seem to change every time. Often refusing to be lines at all. But real stains of graphite, wax and clay; reassembling and refusing to reassemble all kind of things at the same time. Almost forcing me, after all the formal aspects are mentioned, to use a language I am not used to. Describing it in negative way, as a trying to find words for what I think I mean. But in the end the sketch seems to have a spirit of its own. It has not yet arrived, is not divided up, is still vibrating in the space between the actual and the Ought. A space I am invited into to keep on following it, as if it were an end in itself.

Resource list:

Jullien, F. (2009). *The Great Image has no Form, or On the nonobject through painting*. (J. Marie Todd, Trans.). Chicago/London: The University Press of Chicago. (Original work published 2003).

Kant, I. (1928). *The Critique of Judgement*. (J. Creed Meredith, Trans.). Oxford: The Clarendon Press. (Original work published 1790).

Simmel, G. (2010). *The View of life, Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*. (J. A.Y Andrews & D.N. Levine, Trans.). Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1918).

Wikipedia. (z.d.). Tao. Consulted on 2 januari 2020, on <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao>

Wikipedia. (z.d.). Southern School. Consulted on 2 januari 2020, on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_School

