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Poiesis and Art-Making: A Way of Letting-Be

Derek H. Whitehead

Abstract

This article is both philosophical and practical in its intent. It endeavours to bring into focus an idea with an Ancient Greek lineage, *poiesis*, and determine whether it may revitalise our thinking about the 'making' of art. The art-making considered in this paper will concentrate exclusively on Western art and its historical and contemporary manifestations. I suggest that *poiesis* - that which "pro-duces or leads (a thing) into being" - may enable practitioners in the varying art forms, and aestheticians who reflect upon them, to come to a deeper sense of how artworks work: that they realize themselves inter-dependently of the formative conditions of their inception. One question I raise, among others, is: What is the relation between *poiesis* and the sensory embodiments of art making? Here I evoke the notion of the *poietic act*, something which has the potential to reinvigorate the artist's creative energies in and for our times. At a philosophical level I argue that *poiesis* may be seen as a liberating force which seeks to engage the multiple conditions of contemporary aesthetic reflection, and at a practical level I argue that the *poietic act* may be seen in those undercurrents of artistic activity that impel us toward a space of 'unitary multiplicity,' wherein the artist, the artwork, and the receiver of such a work are brought forward in all the features of their self-presentation.

Key Words

Poiesis, praxis, being, art, creativity, expression

1. Introduction

Some opening remarks by way of proceeding. My principal focus in this article is on Western art and aesthetic practice, more particularly from a Continental philosophical perspective. Some may find the Continental tradition indefensibly 'abstract' in nature. I make no apologies for it here. It seems to me to be an adequate basis for a foundational examination of the artistic and philosophic issues I raise in this context. I am conscious that there are Anglo-American, Eastern, and African approaches to aesthetic phenomena and artistic practice that have their stories to tell as well. The present format does not permit their proper evaluation here. I am aware, then, that in concentrating on the Western story of art and its philosophy from a Continental standpoint, only a part of what would otherwise be a more complete picture is being revealed. Other contexts and occasions are needed for the necessary articulation of the Anglo-American, Eastern, and African positions.

What I am offering is not some formulaic response or solution to any supposed problem in postmodern or contemporary aesthetic theory. I simply want to show that *poiesis* is not something abstracted from human thought or artistic activity. Nor is *poiesis*, in this context, intended to account for the complex expressions of contemporary art forms such as performance art, interactive art, and demonstrable 'happenings' of one kind or another. Not every art-form is *poietic* or disposed to articulate the *poietic*. Yet in one sense every art form is performative: it has its own essential being

before any pronouncement, its own mode of address and articulation. It is open to further investigation whether *poietic* traces are to be found in those conditions which favour the many and divergent forms of contemporary art practice which we know today. Though *poiesis* may have conceptual and empirical implications for such practice, insofar as it is consciously evoked by the artist, I intuit their possibilities here rather than argue for any verifying status in their regard.

I submit that *poiesis* is something very much 'in process' contemporaneously, that it remains an 'undercurrent' striving toward the light of day. As such it is likely to surface in rather surprising forms, not least in 'found objects,' 'ready-mades,' 'assemblages,' or 'installations' where the artist's intuitive faculty - in the selection and compositional arrangement of freely chosen elements - appears uppermost. Here I attempt to highlight the presence of a *poietic* dynamic in the activities of contemporary art practice from the perspectives of painting, poetry, and music.

Another feature of a *poiesis* 'in process' is its relationship with the concept of *praxis*. I exemplify their relation from Greek thought, and develop the idea that instead of seeing *praxis* as the exercise of a practical or intentional will alone, we may conceive its relation to *poiesis* as bringing about a transforming encounter between the artist and his/her work in the unfolding conditions of art-making itself. I go on to argue that in a contemporary sense we need to re-engage what I call the *poietic act*: with that which discloses us as the receivers of the gift of art. This raises the issue of who or what gives the gift of art, and I develop this in both aesthetic and artistic terms. And I conclude that working with the raw materials of the imagination (ideas, concepts, schemata) and those of the material order (paint, clay, or stone), constitutes a means of renegotiating our sense of 'place' with a renewed and placeful place of *poietic* and non-exploitative encounter. I develop the idea that *poiesis* may be seen in those undertones of creative activity that drive us toward a space of 'unitary multiplicity,' wherein the artist, the artwork, and the receiver of such a work are brought forward in all the palpability of their self-presentation.

Here I invite dialogue with those of this article's readers who wish to engage these issues further - in a spirit of shared exploration. But firstly, some remarks about the nature of *poiesis* in the philosophical literature itself before we move on to its resonances for Western historical and contemporary artistic practice and aesthetic reflection.

2. *Poiesis* as 'leading into being'

It is commonly thought that aesthetic inquiry into works of art reveals something of their appearances or representations, those aspects of a work's perceptible qualities that 'show' themselves to human perception and thus bring about a response of aesthetic appreciation or aesthetic judgment. We feel that an artwork tells us something about the mind that created it, and that behind such a work are the wellsprings of an active imagination. The acts of creative imagination may take the form of objective works of art. Thus the creatively imaginative individual is one who opens up new territories of being for him/herself and for art's recipients, we who are its observers and receivers.

The creative human being is concerned with the dynamics of his or her daily 'working practice', with the rudimentary dispositions of his or her own bodily being and expressive life. Working practice is seen to emanate from an artist's psychic and bodily being, and works of art are envisaged as the product of an artist's creative will and intentionality. Here the concept of *poiesis* - the sense that an artwork is something produced (or brought into being) - assumes vital significance.

Poiesis may be seen to engage and question what has been called 'the metaphysics of the creative will' in the Western aesthetical tradition. As Giorgio Agamben has argued, such metaphysics is seen to penetrate our conception of art to such a degree that even the most challenging critiques of aesthetics have not questioned its guiding principle, the idea that art is 'the expression of the artist's creative will.' Such critiques remain embedded within aesthetics, Agamben says, "since they are only the extreme development of one of the two polarities on which it founds its interpretation of the work of art, the polarity of genius understood as will and creative force."^[1] In contrast to this *force majeure*, what the Ancient Greeks intended by the term *poiesis* was very different: the heart of *poiesis* had nothing to do with the exercise of a will and everything to do with 'the production of *aletheia*,' with 'unveiling,' and with the opening of a world for humankind's being and action.^[2]

The Greeks drew a distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*. *Praxis* in the Greek sense had to do with the immediate sense of 'an act', of a will that accomplishes or completes itself in action. *Poiesis* was conceived as bringing something from concealment into the full light and radiation of a created work. *Poiesis* is not to be grasped in its features as a practical or voluntary activity, as Agamben persuades us, but rather in its being an 'unveiling,' *a-letheia*, a making known which produces or leads things into presence. The related idea of *technē* (of 'an art' or 'trade') for the Greeks meant 'to cause to appear,' and *poiesis*, 'to produce into presence.' Such production becomes associated with *gnosis*, with 'knowing.' *Poiesis* essentially characterises *technē*, production in its totality.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle interprets *technē* as 'art' or 'technical skill', an artistic skilling that produces, but that is qualitatively distinct from action. He says that art is, in essence, 'a reasoned productive state,' and is the same in kind as the production which is 'truly reasoned.' Indeed, "[e]very art is concerned with bringing something into being, and the practice of an art is the study of how to bring into being something that is capable either of being or of not being, and the [efficient] cause of which is in the producer and not in the product."^[3] Aristotle argues that since production is not the same as action, in the sense that producing occasions things differently from action, art must concern itself with production and not with action. Art here is a state readily conducive to the humanizing of production.

For Martin Heidegger, the notion of *technē* and *technites* (or 'the artist-producer'), tends to reinforce *poiesis* as a principle of origination, of a 'bringing forth' which seeks to be known by being brought into the light (or the clearing) opened up by the created work itself.^[4] Here *poiesis* does not bring itself into presence in the created work as *praxis* brings itself into presence as an act. It is as if *poiesis*, in producing something other than itself, concedes itself to that produced object or

thing which presences itself. That is to say, and as Agamben submits, the artwork is, under the conditions of *poiesis*, "[no longer] the result of a doing, not the *actus* of an *agere* [an acting which 'puts to work'] but something substantially other (*heteron*) than the principle that has produced it into presence". Accordingly, art's point of entry into the aesthetic domain is only possible because "art itself has already left the sphere of production, of *poiesis*, to enter that of *praxis*."^[5] If art has left the productive realm of *poiesis* and entered the aesthetic domain of *praxis*, what follows for 'art making' is all the more significant. Here it may be said that *poiesis* attempts to found the conditions of art making's sacralization, that is, it strives to found art's transforming potentialities in the 'instrumentality' of production.

The idea of linking *technē* and *poiesis* as 'authentic production' is given additional weight by Michael Zimmerman, who says that *technē* is the capacity for 'letting something be seen'; not only known, but seen, or known through seeing. A noteworthy sightfulness appears in our equation of *technē* and *poiesis*. *Technē* involves, as Zimmerman believes, "letting [something] come forth into its own . . . into the arena of accessibility, [of] letting it lie forth as something established stably for itself." Authentic production is not seen in terms of "an 'agent' using 'force' to push material together into a specific form." Instead, such production "is [the] disclosure of entities for their own sake."^[6]

Zimmerman argues that the primary disclosure of what he calls 'the world-founding nature' of the work of art makes possible this productive revelation of things in the world. For Greek craftsmen, the luminous presencing or being of entities was a phenomenon in which they lived and moved, so to speak. In making something, an object for domestic or ritual use, for example, the Greek artisan knew, in the responsibility of ontological disclosure, that he was letting this thing be.^[7] Heidegger's view is that the most prominent figure in society is the artist, not the artisan. The artist founds a world in which producing takes its rightful place, whereas the artisan makes useful things that do not of themselves have the capacity to found a world. Heidegger draws a distinction between 'the work' of an artist and 'the things' of an artisan, as between works of art and handicraft. His main concern is with the relation between art and poetry, and with striving toward a reunification of the artistic and productive dimensions of social life. Heidegger believed there was a greater chance of this happening, of a renewal of society, under the aegis of the poetic art.

The person who participates in world-founding *poiesis* is an artist; whereas the individual who engages in producing things is an artisan. Here poetry and producing have a common trait; they are both modes of 'disclosure.' As Zimmerman writes, "poetry discloses the gods needed to order and found the world, [while] genuine producing discloses things respectfully, in accordance with the vision of the poet."^[8] This implies, and as an elaboration of Heidegger's own stance, that a truly visionary poet or artist has the capacity to bring forth things that are in demonstrable accord with world-founding *poiesis*. Thus artisanal things share something of the numinous quality of created works, whether of art or poetry, insofar as they are oriented toward the disclosure of being.

If it may be said that in truly *poietic* production productivity

exceeds the principle which has brought into being, then this producing or leading into being of a created thing can only be characteristic of some 'otherness' of skill difficult to name. In this respect Emmanuel Levinas says that the skill involved in a technical gesture is already delineated when directed toward a particular goal. For "in the voice [we have] already the delineation of a signifying language and the possibilities of song and poem. Legs that can walk will already be able to dance; [and] hands that can touch and hold, will be able to feel, paint, [or] sculpt ... in the surprise of conforming to an ideal never seen previously." These delineations may be found in a prodigious or "original embodiment of thought, [or] a birth, in all its diversity, of an artistic culture." Here meaningfulness has its harmonies and disharmonies precisely within the human, as Levinas rightly affirms, and such meaningfulness nevertheless remains "in the extreme exoticism of that [human] variety."^[9] In the delight of conforming to an ideal never previously realised or never fully consummated, we have intimations of world-founding *poiesis*. Human creativity in the conditions of world-founding *poiesis* becomes the locus of an expressive temper of soul, and as Levinas declares, "of the whole arrangement indispensable to the manifestation of the Beautiful - to art and poetry."^[10]

This ideal is the mobilising of something that precedes and anticipates our existence. That is to say, *poiesis* prefigures and orders what Schilling has called "that shapeless and dark abyss, the 'hunger to be' that exists before any opposition and without which nothing can come into existence." ^[11] Shapeless, dark, and hungry to be; an intimation of an empowering *poiesis*. What is required of artistic thinking and making is a *poiesis* that liberates the wilfulness of a *praxis* that wants only itself. But how do we in our times bring this kind of *poiesis* about? And how is *poiesis* related to an artist's creative intentionality: that fleshly production which solicits the disclosure of things 'for their own sake'?

3. Creative intentionality and 'letting-be'

Firstly, we may speak of something called a 'schematised' intentionality in our experience of the world, as 'creative' intentionality stems in some ways from a schematised or more generalised intentionality. Schematised intentionality, according to Alphonso Lingis, takes the sense-impressions we form of the world (our reception and synthesis of 'the data' of experience) to mean something. Lingis says we identify the sense-impressions we form of the world by "synthetically taking them as signs of one and the same signification." That is to say, schematised intentionality "makes impressions into sensations, that is, givens of sense, of meaning."^[12] What the artist does with these impressions - by making them into lucid sensations - is to take to a higher (compositional) order this synthesis of signs and their signification. An artist's 'creative intentionality' comes into play as his or her sense-impressions become living sensations. Such sensations find their way into - and transfuse - the work of creativity.

An artist's sensations, whether they be visual, aural, or tactile, make up a superabundance, a field within which artworks find expression through the conceptual tools and material forms of their deployment. That is to say, such artworks begin to assume a living reality - an evolving continuity in the space and time of their articulation outside the formative grounds of their inception. Here I evoke a particular actualization for

artworks, one in which the works themselves seem to take on the decision of self-expression. Is this simply a beguiling anthropomorphism, seeing in artworks the demeanour of self-conscious beings?

Perhaps I can explain this intuition by way of a concrete example, which is also a question: What is the relation between *poiesis* and the sensory embodiments of art making? Take a potter at his wheel. He is seated there in front of this formless mound of clay. Literally, what is he to make of it? In this clay's 'comportment toward being,' as Heidegger might say, we see some thing emerging. The clay is thrown, its essence kneaded into some tangible shape or form. This shape is brought forth or 'led into being.' Thus we may speak of a pot's thrownness, and its openness - the open of a vessel that may yet be filled by the activity of hand or eye. In the grammar of affect between a potter and his clay we witness the working-out of a 'formative' intentionality.

The conceptual possibility that an artwork takes on the decision of self-expression, which is somehow parallel to the artist's creative will and intentionality, suggests that there is some inter-connectedness between an artist's conscious guidance of form and what we might describe as a work's own self-imposed alliances or self-exploratory formations. We see something of this in the compositional process. An artist, writer or musician is at some pains to give a work 'its head,' so to speak; for a work has a life of its own, as the abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock once said, and the attempt is to try and let it 'come through.'

This raises the compelling idea of 'artistic meaning' - the meaning an artist finds in his or her work - as distinct from a work's causal beginnings. In this sense, as G. L. Hagberg writes, the artist "discovers the meaning of [the] work in the materials of the medium, rather than by infusing the materials with significance through the embodiment of an artistic intention."^[13] Here the artist discovers the work within the work, so to speak. The artistic meaning to be found - rather than invested - in a work's particular medium is the reverse side of what Hagberg calls 'emotive meaning,' in that an artist's emotions have their own inarticulate intentionality that seeks expression through his or her creative bodily being. In a parallel way an artwork's impulse toward embodiment in a specific medium, in paint, words, or music, is actualised through an ardent exchange of form and that which is in excess of form: a formless unknown which is not yet ready to hand.

The artist him/herself has a body, and what is produced has an embodied and performative character, whether it takes shape as a pot, a painting, a poem, or a musical composition. For its part, the discipline of phenomenology emphasises the corporeality of the body: the body is an 'intentional subject' - and occupies physical space. The phenomenologist speaks of the intentionality of a human subject's consciousness. But an artist's response to what might be called 'phenomenological intentionality' must be to declare the arduous consciousness of the 'creative act' itself. The creative act has its origins in the givenness of consciousness. It may be intended (*tendere*, 'to stretch out') but is intentional only in an optative, or incomplete, but never a teleological sense. The creative act spends or overreaches itself in allowing the disclosure of a work for its own sake and is thus outside any endpoint.

Can a non-teleological intentionality be justified? What of the 'human skill' that is required to bring a thing into being? Is it something learned or intentional? It might be argued that the human skill necessary to create a work of art is either controlled in its bodily processes and motivations, or demonstrably corporeal in its abilities and *kinesthesias*, which is to say, skills that were once learned and practiced eventually become conscious [unconscious?] and automatic. The demonstrable use of an artistic skill facilitates the passage of an artwork from its origin in the artist to expressible sensibility in the movement of a work from unconsciousness to formal actuality.

We could say, then, that parallel to the artist's intentionality, an artwork's essential features are given in one fundamental operation, that a work makes itself tangible. As a poem seems to write itself under the poet's hand - 'a poem should not mean, but be,' said Archibald MacLeish - so does a work of plastic or performing art compose itself under the artist's eye. The body of an artwork, so to speak, is an agent of change in and through the tangible world. And an artist brings perceptible things in the form of artworks into their true iconic light. For example, Claude Monet said that he did not want to paint objects but rather 'the light suffusing them.' This is an endorsement of perception from within where an artist stands, the world of light suffusing the world of form.

The artist is one for whom the poverty of his or her materials is all that remains in this unveiling of things. It is an inner creative seeing that regathers the things of the world. However, as Heidegger^[14], has argued, the 'created work' is not something adjunct or accidental to an artist's being; it is integral to it. A work comes to be that it may be un-concealed or brought into 'the clearing' in the light of *aletheia*, the unveiling of truth. It is this unconcealedness which gives a work of art its authenticity as a self-presencing thing. A work of art comes into visual, aural or tactile view by invading the spaces and textures of the sensible world, by becoming the unveiling (or *aletheic*) reality it means itself to be.

An artist is not marginal to a work's expressive being. The artist makes a work and is in turn made by it. Something takes place in the exchange between artist and work, for artist and work are instruments one to one another. What takes its place originates in the work, and what is discovered of the work happens through others' responses to it. Importantly, both artist and work concede one another to the world from within the world of their being. The direction of this being, whether from 'world to work' or from 'work to world,' has diacritical significance for the artist. It enables an interplay impelling him or her toward a space of 'unitary multiplicity,' a poetical space wherein the artist, the work, and the receiver of such a work are brought forward in all the lineaments of their self-presentation.

Here the work of *poiesis* is also the *poiesis* of work, the process of making and the thing made. As the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez has aptly said, 'let us think more with our hands.' It is this thinking with our hands that communicates not just any perceived intentionality on the artist's part, but a site or space wherein a multiple and unified complementarity of idea and raw material coincide in the fullest potential of their happening. Working with the raw materials of the imagination (ideas,

concepts, schemata) and those of the material order (paint, clay, or stone), constitutes for the artist and the artwork a means of settling an *Umwelt*, 'a living environment,' a renewed and placeful place of *poietic* and non-exploitative encounter. This might be called an 'experimental *poiesis*,' in that the passage of a created thing from its inception into inter-dependent reality signifies a *kinesthetic* movement in time and circumstance intended to meet and address a receiver.

4. An experimental *poiesis* for contemporary aesthetics?

How might such an experimental *poiesis* of artist, work and receiver enrich contemporary aesthetic reflection? In an emboldened way *poiesis* may be said to reveal and re-veil itself in contemporary cultural production. At a practical level such production seeks to revitalise *praxis* in its sensuous relationship to 'the will.' Insofar as the activity of *poiesis* is, at base, "vital force, drive and energetic tension [and] passion [something that informs *praxis*]," as Agamben says, then *praxis* enables man to produce universally.^[15] That is, there is a universal field construed by and for man as the locus of his production. An experimental *poiesis*, one which gathers itself in human skill, appears as the highest manifestation of creative being, and thus tends to countermand any negative *praxis* of the will.

But what are the implications for artworks conceived as the exercise of a practical will? One thing is certain, according to Zimmerman, that neither works of art nor natural objects need a metaphysical ground on which to stand. The work of art is not based on anything external to it, like a Platonic form, but instead "[the artwork] provides the grounds and limits for things within the world it founds". In opening up a world the artwork does not serve a 'purpose' as such. And as Zimmerman writes, "living things are not 'founded' either on the will of [a] creator or on the principle of sufficient reason: they are because they are."^[16]

Living things are because they are. Here we have intimations of a transmogrifying *praxis* in the sense that works of art initiate the grounds and limits for things within the world they found. If works of art do not require a metaphysical ground on which to stand, they do nevertheless require or initiate some kind of world-foundedness in which to be disclosed. Rather than seeing *poiesis* as that which grounds the self-centred world of the work of art, I would argue that *poiesis* is sensed in the 'self-centering' of a work of art within the grounds of its own world-foundedness. This self-centering (the present tense) of a work implies a still-active and unfolding dynamic, something that is crucial to the tri-partite presentation of artist/work/receiver. A performative work of art, Pierre Boulez' "Structures for Two Pianos," for example, takes on the features of this world-foundedness of a work in the construction of an improvisatory rhythm with the 'forcible insertion' into the music of what Boulez calls 'a free dimension,' something distinct from the governing control of ensemble playing. Such artworks are autonomous and yet interdependent. They have their essential solitude and their overt pronouncement through human agents or performers. Their *poiesis* is made explicit in the spontaneity of an unencumbered and free-flowing *praxis*.

In corresponding fashion contemporary art-making, whether plastic, literary or performative, needs to re-engage with the *poietic* act, for the 'act' of *poiesis* discloses us as the receivers

of the gift of art. What does this gift of art entail? The gift of art is the most original gift, according to Agamben, because art is "the gift of the original site of man." Here the artwork permits man "to attain to his original status in history and time in his encounter with it." Following Aristotle, art is architectonic. Art or *poiesis* is the production of origin; that is to say, "art is the gift of the original space of man, architectonics par excellence."^[17] In his experience of the work of art, "man stands in the truth . . . [that is to say] in the origin that has revealed itself to him in the *poietic* act." In this engagement, artists and observers "recover their essential solidarity and their common ground."^[18] It is the *poietic* act in the recovery of this shared solidarity that shows us to be the receivers of the gift of art.

But who or what gives the gift of art? If the one addressed by a work of art is the ultimate receiver of the gift, then it is plausible to suggest that both the artist and the work give this gift to the receiver. From a metaphysical or even a spiritual standpoint, this gift of art, as the gift of both artist and work to their recipients, is a demonstrable giving of a re-inaugurated original space, of a *poietical* space which defines and empowers human experience in the generosity of an art - consider Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* - which is thematically intelligent and emotionally arresting. For as Henri Focillon has said, a work of art "must [eventually] renounce thought, must become dimensional, must both measure and qualify space. It is in this very turning outward that [a work's] inmost principle resides"^[19] I venture to say that a work's inmost principle is defined by its particular *poiesis*. In its 'turning outward' a work is made dimensional, measuring and qualifying the space about it. This outward turn of a work is a turning toward the *poietical* space of an artist and receiver in the interplay of their self-interestedness, that is to say, in the sheer enjoyment to be had from a work's undaunted expressive re-presentation in the lives of artists and receivers.

Such encounters with the transforming power of art cannot be reduced to a succession of sensate or pleasurable instants, nor deprived of a reflexive situatedness in the responses of aesthetic appreciation. Otherwise its essential traits and our engagement with them fall prey to mere aestheticism. If artists and receivers recover solidarity and common ground through the origin revealed to them in the *poietic* act, as Agamben maintains, what follows for aesthetics? If aesthetics is no longer able to think art in its proper disposition, to attain the essential structure of the artwork, because art is now at the extreme end of a nihilistic metaphysical destiny, as Agamben further argues, then 'the essence' of art, a true complexity for aesthetic thought, remains closed to us.

A truly *poietic* aesthetics, as I now invoke it here, offers something substantially different. For if the essence of art and its practices are governed by the claims of the sensuous and the particular, as Jay Bernstein believes, then can it be said that art introduces an alternative conception of acting, one that binds *poiesis* and *praxis*, making and doing together?^[20] It seems to me that a *poiesis* which heralds the gift of art to man as its natural and embodied recipient goes some way to reclaiming the essence of art for our contemporary historical space. In this respect alone, perhaps, *poiesis* has the potential to overcome what Agamben has called "the interminable twilight that covers the *terra aesthetica*."^[21] But how are

artists and receivers disposed to such a *poiesis*?

In human creativity the work of *poiesis* may be sensed as a *kinetic* gesturing: the stroke of a brush, the shaping of a poem, the dexterous skill of a musician. Such activities have a determined symmetry of parts and a distinct temper of being. *Poietic* activity signals the emergence of a figure or rhythm - a transmissible figuration - from the hand of the painter, poet, or musician. Genuine producing requires the work of 'the head' and 'the hands.' Working with raw materials constitutes the kind of producing which places itself in and through the created thing that is let be. *Poiesis* here has its own reserve, so to speak, wherein what is held back and handed over in works of art is akin to the Greek *epoche*, 'epoch,' something given and retained, secreted away from too ready availability, and thus held simultaneously in the twofold flow of gift and reservation.

What would such a *poiesis* need to be, or become, for its contemporaneity to be recognised? And how might it shape contemporary artistic practice and aesthetic thought?

I return to the interchange between potter and clay, of the ways in which he or she responds to the inchoate inclinations of that clay kneaded and moulded under the fingers. I spoke of this pot's *poiesis*, its thrownness and its openness; an openness that may yet be filled by hand or eye in an unfurling of its own form-full-ness, something continually shaped by the invisibilities at the heart of production and in the expansiveness of symbolic invention. Here the *logos* of the aesthetic world brings into fuller existence the culture of an artistic world, those ways in which 'things make themselves things and the world makes itself world' (so Levinas) in the poignant manifestations of a *poiesis* that faces us in the making.

What I would call the field of practical *poiesis* becomes for the artist a means of knowing when and how to incline or induce the self-presencing of things, things let be of their own innermost need. An artist will achieve this, in plastic, literary, or performative terms, by a wide-eyed fidelity to what Paul Klee has called the 'pre-creation,' 'creation,' and 'post-creation' of the created thing^[22]; that is to say, by faithfulness to an artwork's conception, growth, and articulation. In a contemporary way, aesthetic reflection will recognise that what is pre-conscious in art-making works toward a more conscious articulation in the created thing. And that which is post-conscious in the fullest sense, a work of actualised creation, will attest to a condensing and freeing of the tensions wrought by a passionately engaged *poiesis*. Here we may expect to see the gift of art through artist and work to receiver as the means whereby both the autonomy of an artwork (the autonomy given by the artist), and a work's own inter-dependence (its enactment through human agents), to be two integral facets of the same refining sensibility in the experience of *poietic* arousal and of kinesthetic engagement.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that *poiesis* is something 'in process' contemporaneously, that it remains a subjacent influence striving toward realization. As such it is likely to surface in forms wherein the artist's intuitive faculty appears paramount. A corresponding feature of a *poiesis* 'in process' is its relationship with *praxis*. Rather than seeing *praxis* as the

exercise of an intentional will alone, we may see its relation to *poiesis* as bringing about a transforming encounter between the artist and his or her work in the unfolding conditions of art-making, which itself communicates a *poietic* world-view to art's recipients.

Finally, I have said that we need to re-engage the *poietic* act in a contemporary way as something that finds its own unforeseen passage into those kinds of artistic production, in the labors of the eye, hand and head, that remain poised and receptive to its moods. And I have suggested that *poiesis* will be sensed in those undercurrents of artistic activity that impel us toward a place of 'unitary multiplicity,' wherein the artist, the artwork, and the receiver enact themselves in the full complementarity of their self-abandonment. I venture to hope that the space that *poiesis* opens up to our sense of questioning encounter with the diverse forms of art-making today will yield new and surprising discoveries, and harness the rich potential available to us in our experience of art and in aesthetic reflection.

Endnotes

[1] Giorgio Agamben, "Poiesis and Praxis," in *The Man Without Content*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 72.

[2] Agamben, *ibid.*, p. 72.

[3] Aristotle, "Art or Technical Skill (*technē*)," in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. J.A.K. Thomson (London: Penguin Edition, 1977), p. 208.

[4] See Martin Heidegger's, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (London and Toronto: Harper and Row, Perennial Library, 1935/1975), especially Section One: "Thing and Work," pp. 17ff.

[5] Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 73.

[6] Michael Zimmerman, "Authentic Producing as *Technē* and *Poiesis*," in *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 229-230.

[7] Zimmerman, *ibid.*, p. 230.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 231.

[9] Emmanuel Levinas, 1998, "The Philosophical Idea of the Determination of Culture," in *On Thinking-of-the-Other, entre nous*, trans. Michael B Smith and Barbara Harshav, (London: The Athlone Press), p. 183.

[10] Levinas, *ibid.*, p. 183.

[11] Cited in Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, pp. 76-77.

[12] Alphonso Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.

[13] G.L. Hagberg, *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 3.

[14] Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, pp. 56ff.

[15] Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 85.

[16] Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontations with Modernity*, p. 235.

[17] Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, pp. 100-101.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[19] Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1934/1992), p. 34.

[20] Jay M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

[21] Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 103.

[22] Paul Klee, "Notebooks," Volume 2, in *The Nature of Nature*, ed. Jürg Spiller, trans. Heinz Norden (London: Lund Humphries, 1929/1973), pp. 259ff.

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