THE AGENCY OF TRANSFORMATION

notes for *Begin beginning*

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[Life] is not simply an energy or set of properties. It is an activity in and of itself. Life did not passively adapt to pre-existing environments. It modified itself, to such an extent that environments have changed forms of life just as forms of life have changed environments.

Achille Mbembe, *The Earthly Community*

We can be world, and become world, only by transforming it radically and letting ourselves be transformed by it.

Emanuele Coccia, *Philosophy of the Home*

Akin to life, art can be such a big baggy term. It is said often yet, just like life, remains almost stubbornly ill-defined. And maybe for the reason that, again just like life, art doesn't fit into a set of properties. But let's agree: both art and life are activities. Maybe it is obvious to say that the activity of life brings living things into existence in which it is at stake. Yet maybe it is less obvious to say that the activity of art brings things into existence in which it is also at stake. Entities, forms, objects, all manner of things come into existence and, although sometimes as fragile as butterfly wings and sometimes as hard as nails, the activity (of art, of life) doesn't stop there.

Life has its 'materials' and the truth is we don't know the half of it. With these materials life makes itself and, as this happens, these materials become not only inseparable from life but also transformed. Life's activity involves coming into existence and living; it also involves transformation. The complexity can leave you speechless. And art – the activity of art – has its 'materials', which in one way or another make its existence and with which these materials not only become inseparable from art but are also transformed.

Transformation is internal to the activity of art and life, and it can be so unexpected, unlike the manufacturing of goods. The transformation can be magical, but what of the agency of this transformation? With activity there is agency and, to take a leaf out of life's activity, let me say that there is no agent that stands apart from or prior to the activity. Can the same be said of art? The activity of art is inseparable from the transformation of materials, even if this is almost imperceptible – but who is the agent of this? It is fair to say that the prevailing presumption is that agency is in the hands of the artist even if there isn't a sign of a handmade mark in sight, as happens with the 'materials' of photography and film along with many other things. The agent is the artist.

With the activity of art, you may well see transformations having happened to metal, wood, stone, paint or language or that image, that colour, that cloth. You may well hear transformations having happened to music, speech and noise. And you may well see hitherto meanings, relations and images of materials transformed. And let's not forget that 'materials' could well be concepts, clichés, metaphors. And again I ask: what of the *agency* of these transformations?

Here is the prevailing story. The agency of the artist acts upon materials, which are passive in receiving the action. And the word for 'one acted upon' is a patient. Those materials are patients. Here the process passes from an agent (artist) toward an object (whatever material), which is separate from her actions. But what if we made this story spin such that the agent and patient ceased to be in any fixed position?

This would mark a turnaround in that prevailing story. Now it is acknowledged, seen, understood that those materials, be they metal, tape, wood, stone, paint, metaphor or cliché, have agency and the agent-artist is affected (acted upon) by them. But in no way does this deny the artist her agency; rather it embraces a two-way process – what can be called a 'reciprocal immanence' – where it is not possible to distinguish between agent and patient.

An image of this indistinguishability, and there is nothing soppy or sentimental about it, is a kiss that has lingered such that it can't be told who the giver is and who is the receiver, who is agent and who is patient. It is also forms of life acting upon and changing their environments as environments act upon and change forms of life. (As I write, I am fully aware that language is acting upon me and affecting me in as much as I am acting upon language.)

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'New animism' is a term that of late has gained currency. There are various takes that transform (in some way reawaken) the archaic belief that 'nature', objects and places (rivers and mountains) are endowed with life, soul, spirits and powers. And these various takes involve: the de-objectification in Western culture of all that which has been deemed non-human; the imbuing of not only 'nature' but also technical objects such as supercomputers, artificial intelligence, nanobots, smart appliances in the home with agency and subjectivity (and sometimes personhood); and the ceasing of nature being seen and treated as the opposite of culture and bringing with it the understanding of a vast interconnectivity or, as some like to say, entanglement.

In a short article called 'New Animism', Emanuele Coccia points to a deeply rooted form of animism in 'Western' society that sees the subjective character of objects; it is art. There is, he says, 'a sphere in which we are all unconsciously but invariably animists: we actually call art that cultural space in which we relate to objects as if they were subjects'. Every day, millions of people enter museums and art galleries and 'come across more or less finished portions of linen cloth covered with layers of pigment, or structures of steel, marble, wood [and] see the presence of a subject.'

Subjectivity and agency are credited to these 'materials' (or 'matter' as Coccia would say), which meld with and become inseparable from the subjectivity and agency that is perceived or felt with the art objects before you. 'In front of artistic objects,' he says, 'we are all animists'. Art objects, the materials or matter that combine and become transformed as these

objects come into existence, are not the only things that agency and subjectivity is conferred upon. It also happens in the sciences. So very often, the 'objects' of science are treated as subjects and are attributed with subjectivity, even machines. Objects become recognised as subjects.

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There are situations where the activity of art and its 'materials' involve spatio-temporal movement: a sequence of moving images or bodies, speaking out loud in a certain location for a certain amount of time, durations of audio sensations, plays of light and dark, even the act of reading, I could go on... These situations don't necessarily bring into existence the defining outline that describes an object, but there is the transformation that the activity of art is inseparable from. For sure, the transformation may be incorporeal, such as almost imperceptible shifts in the meanings, images and relations that certain materials hitherto have had or the resituating of things normally found *there* now being present *here*; yet with the agency of these transformations what persists is that reciprocal process where it is not possible to distinguish between agents and patients. Yes, this is the *activity* of art, and it doesn't stop there; for I am here (and I could be anyone) looking, listening, thinking, feeling. Let's say I am affected and to be affected is to be acted upon.

If I am in front of an art-object, am I just the 'patient' passively receiving? But it's not the case. The activity of art extends to me, and that activity doesn't take away 'my' agency. On the contrary, this agency, my agency, acts in being open to receiving – looking, listening, thinking, feeling. Which is to say: openness and receptivity have nothing passive about them. The activity of art is always a two-way process. I am acting upon what is acting upon me. For sure, what is happening is incorporeal; nonetheless, here comes again that indistinguishability between acting and being acted upon, agent and patient. Here again comes reciprocal immanence. An integral part of the activity of art is you and I being open and receptive, and just like any of the 'materials' that in their transformation bring art into an existence (and with which it is at stake), I can in the instance of that indistinguishability and reciprocal immanence become transformed and without a bone in my body changing.

We need to talk about the reciprocal immanence where, in the company of the existence(s) of art, agent and patient coincide and fall together. And we need to acknowledge that with the falling together of agent and patient, criticality by no means goes out of the window; on the contrary, it is now going both ways. And it is transformative.

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At the root of animism is *anima* – to breathe. It is living. In the *Earthly Community*, the philosopher and activist Achille Mbembe says that to rethink the common we could ... 'start from the act of breathing, from

the fact of our all sharing the same need for air'. All beings, human and non-human (plants included) are connected through a shared breath, a vital breath.

The central principle of the world is *animation*. The world is animated: everything is interconnected, everything acts upon and is acted upon by everything else, and it means there are many two-way processes and reciprocal transformations. Yet we know there is a history of things only ever going in one way. It is all about acting upon, conquering, dominating, grabbing, extracting, taking over and just taking and taking and taking. Call it colonialism. Call it capitalism. Call it war. We also know that for some the very idea of sharing the same breath and remaining open to others and transformation is an anathema.

The activity of life repeatedly brings transformation, and it means we are always something else besides ourselves; yet brutal regimes will kill the very idea of this as they will also do their utmost to deny many any form of agency – life becomes the endurance and sufferance of being acted upon. Those who pride themselves on their identity and do everything to 'own it' and preserve it and fight for it can never become immune to transformation – the racists, xenophobes, zealots and dictators kid themselves that they have immunity, but they never have.

The activity of art that is happening in *Begin beginning* is utterly up front in asking you and me to acknowledge the agency of its 'materials' in their transformations. What is more, there is the repetition that, in so may ways, makes this work, and as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, in *Against Progress*, for the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard transformation is a repetitive movement, 'a movement of *repeating the beginning* again and again'.

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Begin beginning asks you, again and again, to hold dear the reciprocal immanence where agent and patient fall together and become indistinguishable. There is no other way to put it: this reciprocal immanence is a shared breath.

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Notes

Emanuele Coccia, 'The new animism' (*TECHNE – Journal of Technology for Architecture and Environment*, (21) 2021) 33–36. https://doi.org/10.36253/techne-10999

Achille Mbembe, *The Earthly Community: Reflections on the Last Utopia*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing, 2022) p.100.

Slavoj Žižek, *Against Progress* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025) ix, p.48.

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