

## **One Hundred Ways to Cook an Egg**

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Like kitchen implements, some occupations are as ancient as civilisation itself, while others are so specific as to be the preserve of the most technologically advanced and affluent societies. New occupations and professions come into being all the time, reflecting changes in basic human needs and opinions on how to live well, and requiring vast, ongoing bureaucratic machinery to determine educational standards and qualifications, accreditation, certification and licensing, affiliations and codes of ethics. Neither is the status of those who perform these roles static. The public perception of police, bankers, chefs and doctors can shift between heroic, tyrannical, glamorous, untrustworthy, a cornerstone of society and so on. And attitudes towards specialist knowledge itself range between envy, respect, suspicion and hostility. Depending on your mood and the specialist in question, you might ascribe knowledge and mastery to hard work and dedication, or to cheating or privilege, or maybe even to genius, which you could believe to be hardwired into genes or akin to witchcraft. Or you might defer to stereotypes – the naughty nurse, the dashing fireman, the wild-haired composer, the ruthless entrepreneur – since stereotypification is a way of ‘knowing’ the other.

Some criticise specialisation as being bound up in power and status, others as a sign of conformity to meritocratic bureaucracy. Unified knowledge and skills are described, on the one hand, as the effect of modern industrial progress, the division of labour adopted to increase understanding, control and prosperity; or, on the other hand, as a degrading symptom of rationalism and capitalism, dissociating individuals from their material world due to their being encouraged, or forced, to understand narrower and narrower segments of a wider reality that will ultimately remain beyond their influence. The Zurich Dadaists, whose centenary Manifesta 11 also marks, were radical proponents of this latter view. Appalled by the nationalism that had propelled Europe into the First World War, they massed their efforts against the centrifugal forces of logic, and most notably language, since meaninglessness at the level of the word held huge significance for them in the register of social and international relations. Release from the consolidation of language and experience along nationalist lines would, it was hoped, produce limitless subjectivities that could never be rallied to violence en masse. But is this not the state in which we find Western capitalist

societies today: infinite relative relations among a multitude of individuals, each of whom understands the world in his or her own terms, according to an idiosyncratic constellation of fragments of ideologies, aspirations and habits of thought. And this fetishisation of individuality, this specialisation in the self, is considered by some to be the rub. For them, logics held in common across nation states, races, genders, classes and disciplines should be emphasised not eradicated.

And yet people in other disciplines, like ‘foreigners’ or people in the past, definitely do things differently. In the workplace, as in academia, each area of knowledge and endeavour has its armoury of technologies and its histories of methods; and its own vocabulary too, much of which will be opaque to outsiders. There are models, exemplars, methodologies, analogies and references, which must all be learned by those who wish to speak the lingua franca of dentistry, wastewater treatment or spa management. And there will be a particular material oeuvre, as well as client and distribution networks, all occultly interwoven into the fabric of the world at large. Any interdisciplinary foray, then, requires maps, charts, phrasebooks, dictionaries, glossaries and tour guides, for only with such tools does an interdisciplinary adventurer stand a chance of interpreting signage, culture and customs. Even then, she must draw at times on her own experience for comparison, and at others give herself up to marvelling at strangeness.

Interdisciplinary adventures tend to be temporary, which might make the displacement of established knowledge by new knowledge unappealing. Or perhaps a mind is too full of existing information to take on any more, or the language is so foreign that it cannot ‘stick’. What is actual might not match expectations, or received ideas might not make room for what is discoverable, or an eagerness to recognise things might distort them. Be it traditional watchmaking or transsexual prostitution observed with a lack of technical understanding or a strong desire to empathise, the visitor will always bring an agenda that influences what she sees and how she interprets it. This partly explains why, when practitioners from different fields come together, there are invariably misunderstandings, mistakes and general confusions. It is often claimed that these discrepancies are, potentially, most generative of all. Generative for artists, that is, if not for fire- or crime-fighters, because where some require accuracy and consistency, artists supposedly thrive among the rubble of logic. But this is to stereotype artists. In film and television they are represented as smooth chancers, tortured individualists, impoverished passionates, pretentious climbers or

over-sensitive poets. Within the art world they are variously described as failure-seeking experimentalists, ethically motivated consciousness-raisers or politically astute tricksters. We should add to this list Isaiah Berlin's description of the fox, in contrast to the hedgehog, who knows one big thing:

[Foxes] lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without consciously or unconsciously seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fantastical, unitary inner vision.<sup>1</sup>

The curious artist who has abandoned all grand narratives seems familiar indeed.

The proliferation of materials, forms, genres and disciplinary crossovers employed by artists over the course of the twentieth century certainly suggests the presence of foxes. To the traditional materials have been added the industrial, the synthetic and found objects, the animal, the vegetable and the abstract. By abstract I don't mean imagery, but such dematerialised human by-products as boredom, sociability, pleasure and guilt. Actions, discussions, emotions and their conventions, consequences and potential have all become viable stuff from which art can be made. In these instances the artist (or, as is the case here, the artist-turned-curator) performs as a catalyst, setting up situations in which participants perform their relationship to the situation and to one another, revealing their attitudes at every turn.

Contrary to some accounts of these situation-based practices, the result is not always utopian. The artist's aim is not necessarily to raise the consciousnesses of participants, to emancipate a community or to foster enriching relationships. And neither is the mode of collaboration a given. The entirely discursive, collective process is on the table as a possibility, but so is the system of rotating leadership, where each participant has their own area or moment of jurisdiction. While there is an ethical dimension to any undertaking that involves people, whether in the name of art or not, there is not necessarily an imperative for an artist to relinquish authorship or to

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (New York: Mentor Books, 1957), p. 8.

prioritise questions of conscience, obligation, respect or justice. In the making of art, the primary operation has historically been that of transformation in its widest sense: the transformation of paint into illusion, stone into figurative presence, found objects into an abject or seductive experience, a roomful of people into an affecting situation, an overlooked something or other into a profundity... The transformative process might be beautiful, ingenious, slight, outrageous, familiar, hilarious, odd or mundane. It might make the familiar strange, the utilitarian exotic, the authoritative silly or the clear ambiguous. But it will always involve something being made, or seeming to have been made, into something else, even if that something else resides only in the perception of the audience, as a change in perspective or an insight. Unlike certain 'real' magics, where something is indeed made out of nothing, artworks are a modification of something existing, even if that something is as intangible as memories, a discussion or pure speculation. An artwork made out of psychotherapy or a dog salon, then, is yet another point on these art-historical curves.

Among this ever-expanding list of stuff out of which art can be made, there is something particularly piquant about artists engaging with other occupations and professions as directly as they are here. Since contemporary art is the undisciplined discipline, with histories, technologies, methods and models too numerous and unruly to pat down into a single practicable account, a fitting analogy would seem to be the clash between Dionysus and Apollo, between chaos and reason. But this misconception should be disassembled through many important arguments. The entanglement of art and its markets is one factor that aligns art with all occupations in capitalist societies – the artist is never free from such constraints – and Manifesta itself is evidence of the professionalisation of art practices, and their dovetailing with global economies and nation states. A second factor is the notion of art practice. While contemporary art as a whole is heterogeneous, a genre without fixed generic markers, an individual artist has plenty of stable ways of doing things, whether this pertains to organising their thoughts, relating to subjects, making artworks or deciding what gets exhibited. It might outrage some to suggest that these could be relabelled as planning, researching, manufacturing and distributing, but my point here is not to suggest that artists are irrevocably lost to entrepreneurship and order fulfilment (although entrepreneurs are said to take many a lead from artists' modes and methods). It is more to highlight that most human endeavours share certain basic

procedures, even though no two applications of those procedures are the same. And to remind us that what people do for money, they also do for other reasons.

Zurich, a wealthy city at the centre of a global European economy, is an unfathomably complex instantiation of a multitude of just such procedures and motives, which inhabits interlocking structures of yet more unfathomable complexity. It is a late capitalist society marked by the familiar paradox of interconnectedness and remoteness, of being able to lay one's hand on anything, but, more often than not, without understanding where it has been made or how it works. We can no longer insist on mastery over the technological objects that are handled daily – technical support packages have replaced personal knowledge – but we still demand localised mastery from those engaged in occupations and professions. We expect a chef to know one hundred ways to cook an egg, even if she cannot control the cooker's gas supply; we require the linguist to know the meaning of a sentence in context, even if she cannot hold all possible contexts in her head at once, and a therapist must be able to select an appropriate therapy, even if the cause of trauma remains unknown. These people, who handle such specific aspects of our lives, are as immersed in the opaque and shifting universe of ambiguous and conflicting meanings and intentions as anyone else. The difference is that they have mastered aspects of it that the traditions and remits of their occupations and professions prescribe; and that there are, within the perimeters of their disciplines, fixed meanings by which they orientate themselves.

Since, at the time of writing, no artworks yet exist, I can only speculate on the interference patterns produced when an artist enters another field of knowledge, when interpretations clash, correspond or circumvent one another entirely. For the representation of each project I must defer to the Art Detectives, who are much better placed, skilled and tooled-up to uncover something approaching the real turn of events. From my own disciplinary vantage point, though, I can envisage how the artworks will smuggle within them the conversations, confusions and translations that informed them. My guess is that it will be difficult to discern the threshold between an artist's decision and a host's suggestion, an erroneous reading and an inventive leap, an extension of a logic and its subversion. Like the city and the global systems from which these artworks have emerged, their backstories will be too complex and ambiguous ever to retrieve in full. But thankfully, even more so than with cars or mobile telephones, we do not need to understand their workings in order to feel their effects.