



ARTISTIC INTELLIGENCE AND OUR AESTHETIC RESPONSE TO THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

At the ELIA Biennial Conference: *Arts Plural* in Milan (2024), I gave the following presentations: ‘Being present, in the present, to what presents itself’ and ‘Encounters with emergence’. There I contrasted two sets of approaches to contemplating the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world.

One (e.g., informed by posthumanism) aims at ‘decentring the human’, and the other, instead (e.g., on basis of phenomenology) *foregrounds* human presence, embodiment, and corporeality.

I asked myself: “What happens if we *start off* from the givenness of our human presence and from there explore the myriads of relationships we have with an other-than-human cosmos?” I engage with this theme in the context of an exploration of what possible affordances artistic intelligence may offer through practicing or facilitating art-driven, aesthetic, and embodied processes.

Thereby, I am not only interested in what art can bring when we try to navigate the field of connections with the more-than-human world but also when we seek novel ways of engaging the complexities and uncertainties of our current era.

To make a first attempt at unpacking this, I start by taking a closer look at the very notion of that type of intelligence that is informed by art.

ARTISTIC
INTELLIGENCE

There is a telltale sign of when someone is truly applying artistic intelligence in a given situation. It is the moment that the person concerned, when asked to please define what it in essence might be, before anything else, *evades* giving a neat and straight answer. With manifestations of artistic intelligence, it is perhaps a bit like it is with the behaviour of quantum particles: their presence can only be inferred from their interactions and the ‘tracks’ they leave in detectors, rather than through direct observation. Through registering the effects of artistic intelligence on the world we can perchance begin to start grasping some of the workings of this ability in action.

Intelligence, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* is, in a very basic sense, the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills. Transposed to the concept of *artistic* intelligence, it would follow that in principle something can be distinguished, identified, or singled out as a specifically *artist’s* way of attaining and subsequently employing new knowledge. But to me, such a conceptualisation has a too static ring, for it assumes one can readily isolate and foreground something immaterial—knowledge—that can be acquired from our artful or art-informed interactions with the living world, and that such knowledge can then later be released again—applied—back into it. British sculptor

Antony Gormley would rather want to shift the focus from knowledge to the notion of understanding. When I asked him in 2010 if he would agree with me that art, as a mode and process of engagement or learning, can potentially provide us with forms of knowledge that no other endeavour can, he responded like this:

I am worried about that notion of 'knowledge'. Eliot said: "Where is the understanding we have lost in knowledge?" 'Knowledge' suggests defined quantities, whilst 'understanding' suggests a degree of uncertainty, of not-knowing, and indicates an open-ended process. I think that art can absolutely be a catalyst for a process of understanding and, through engagement, maybe even of empathy, too (A. Gormley, personal communication, 1 February 2010).

In my presentation in Milan, I began by showing images that for me epitomize how we in the modern world, through a centuries-long process, have grown apart from the rest of the living world. One image was that of crawly creatures on the bottom floor of Noah's Ark by Jan Luyken, in a book by Wilhelmus Goeree from 1690 (fig. 1 & 2). The publication presents a print series with several cross sections of the ark. The prints can be read as a kind of 'ladder of nature', *scala naturae*, rising from the 'imperfect' forms of life (below) to the most 'perfect' (at the top). The bottom floor is where the four-legged animals are housed, and at the very bottom is the 'stinking pit into which the beasts relieve themselves of their piss and ordure'. Crawling in this filthy basin are 'all manner of vermin' such as snakes, toads, lizards, centipedes, snails, spiders, worms, and beetles.

Another visual I showed was the short film *The Acrobatic Fly* that British naturalist and filmmaker F. Percy Smith made in 1910 of a pinned fly glued upside down to a matchstick (fig. 3), only 22 years after Louis Le Prince shot the first motion picture ever, in 1888. The response by audiences at the time was a mix of amazement at the technical achievement and amusement at the anthropomorphic, circus-like performance, but some viewers were also repelled by the perceived cruelty to the fly.

To me, both representations are graphic for how we have distanced ourselves from the rest of nature.

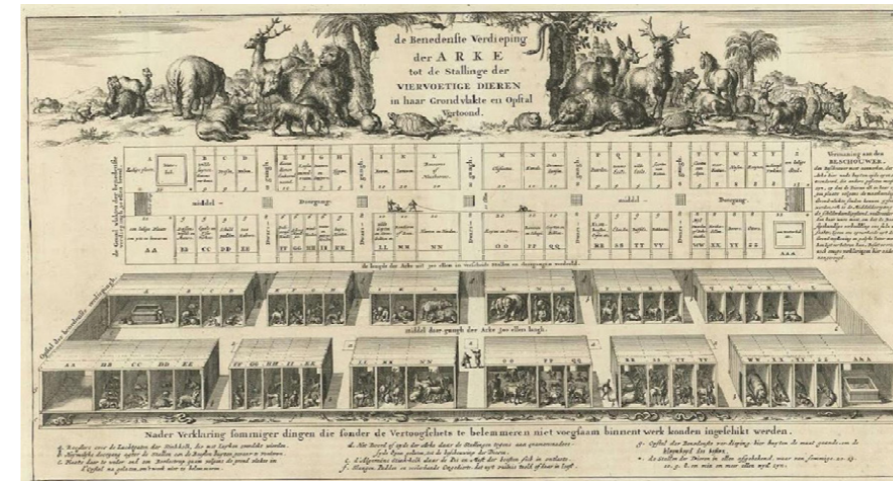
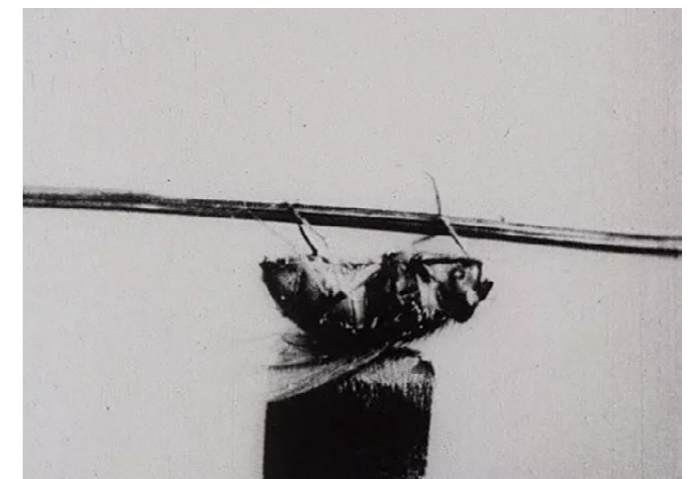
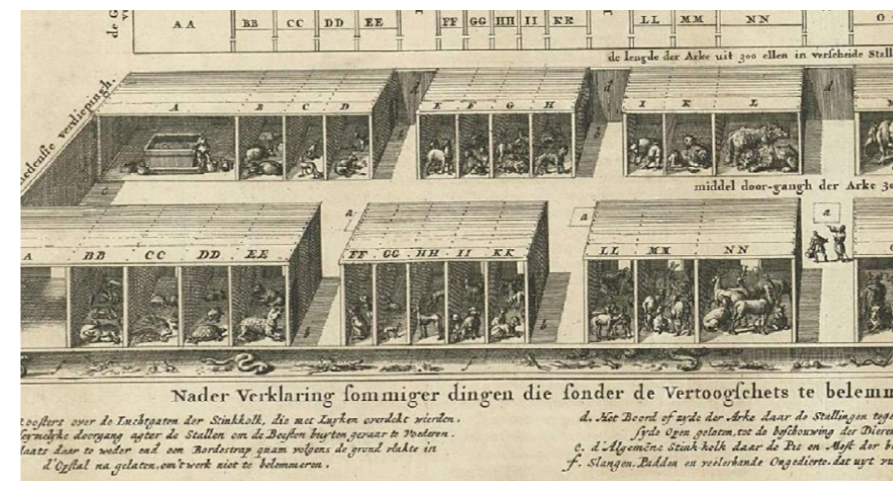


Fig 1. Jan Luyken, (the third of) *Three Storeys of Noah's Ark*, in Wilhelmus Goeree, *Voor-bereidselen tot de bybelsche wysheid, en gebruik der heilige en kerkelijke historien* (3 volumes), Amsterdam 1690, vol. 2. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Fig 2. Detail, with crawly creatures from the bottom floor of Noah's Ark.

Fig 3. Screenshot from *The Acrobatic Fly* (1910) by F. Percy Smith.



Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) famously stated—though the source of the quote has never been detected in any of his work according to his youngest daughter, Nora Bateson—that “the major problems in the world today are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think.” How have we grown so out of touch with the rest of the living world? I suggested in my talks that this may be due to an atrophying of our sensorial ability to connect to the natural world, a point of view that is eloquently argued in David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997). Could it be that the ecological crisis is at its root an aesthetic crisis of our perception of the world?

This very point was made by the late psychologist James Hillman (1926–2011), as he voiced a strong plea to bring back deeper attention to the dimensions of beauty and love in our world. First, Hillman said, it is through sense perception that the world gets to us; the Greeks called this *aesthesis*. He believed that when we suppress and no longer trust our aesthetic responses, we leave the world to itself and isolate ourselves from its plight. Usually, in our time, the word ‘aesthetic’ is employed to mean only pretty, decorative, and quite free of moral and ethical value. When he goes back to the roots of the word ‘aesthetic’, Hillman then also connects it with ethics, and more profoundly with the cosmos itself. Beauty for him isn’t just personal taste, nor is it inherent in the form. In between is something more psychologically instinctual, which he calls ‘the soul’s reaction’:

I think we have an immediate sense of attraction to things; all people have it—a delight in them. They seduce us and they repel us. It is how we read the world—how our animal nose and ears and eyes read the world. Cultural norms and habits may sway us this way or that, but beneath these social criteria is the instinct—the aesthetic response itself, which makes selections and draws back from ugliness as Plotinus wrote 1,700 years ago; the ugly makes us withdraw, shrink into ourselves, turn away (Hillman, 1996).

The American depth psychologist takes this up in the context of finding an answer for how we are to respond to the ecological crisis, and he plainly states that ethics alone is not enough to make a change in the

world. Ethics without aesthetics doesn’t hold. Hillman is convinced that we are not motivated to fight for the environment or against climate change simply because we ought to. Intellectually, we may know that we are ethically responsible for our patterns of consumption, but that does not propel us into action. Nor does the mere act of contemplating what we leave for future generations.

We must first be moved by beauty. For then, love is aroused. When you love something, then you want it near, not to be harmed. [...] What evokes love? As has been said in many places in many ages and felt by any one of us, it’s beauty. An aesthetic perception draws forth our ethical care. First awaken aesthesis, breathe in the beauty of the cosmos—the meticulous crawl of an insect, the heave of the frosted earth as winter yields its grip, observe the composite complexity of an ordinary stone, the eddies in the sand as the tide recedes, or hear the early morning bird call. Beauty astounds and pulls the heart’s focus toward the object, out of ourselves, out of this human-centred insanity, toward wanting to keep the cosmos there for another spring and another morning. This is the ecological emotion, and it is aesthetic and political at once (Hillman, 1996).

The ecology movement, Hillman argued, is going to miss it, as long as people imagine it as a movement primarily focused on health or as a scientific field of interchange, an ‘-ology’. Rather, it should be imagined as well, or especially, through beauty: “A lot of the mess of the world is because we don’t regard it as beautiful. So therefore, why not litter it? The feeling of beauty makes things already sacred and the messing it up as [an act of] desecration” (Hillman, 1997).

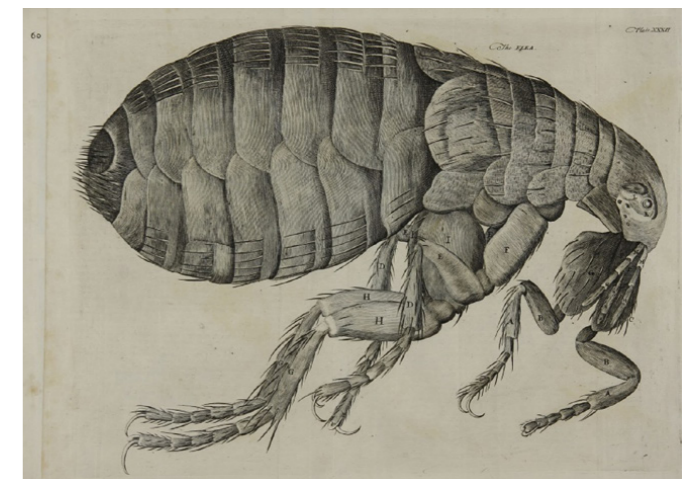
WIDE IDENTIFICATION

Somewhere on the slopes of Hallingskarvet mountains in Norway, philosopher Arne Næss (1912–2009) had a self-built cabin. Once, he was sitting at the table, with a microscope in front of him. Besides having worked a lifetime with such diverse themes as language logic, scepticism, and deep ecology, Næss was also an amateur chemist. He had just put together two drops of different liquids on a glass plate, and now he was observing how they reacted to each other. As it happens, a lemming crawled around on the same table. By a strange coincidence, a flea (fig. 4) jumped out of the fur of this small rodent and landed into the mixing liquids. Slowly, the flea drowned and there was nothing that Næss could do to save it. He could only bear witness through his microscope, he later professed, to the death struggle of the insect, which lasted ten full minutes. Næss was astonished about how much the contracting limb movements of the flea reminded him of the way human beings would move when they suffer from pain. For him this was a moving example of what he had come to term ‘wide identification’—that is, to recognise part of the Self in another living creature. To him, this was of high importance, because such identification makes a person more inclined to act on behalf of fellow creatures.

Næss was weary of efforts to engage people through pointing out their supposed guilt. In a similar vein to James Hillman, he believed in another course of action,

by moving the ground from ‘ethics’ to ‘aesthetics’. In this, he was inspired by Immanuel Kant’s distinction between a ‘beautiful act’ and a ‘moral act’. An act is moral if it is in accordance with your ethical duty: you have an obligation to do something, and you do it. Often, this may go against your inclinations, against what you want to do. For Kant, a beautiful act is an act where we act *with* our inclinations, so that it is what we *want* to do. Næss held that through spiritual or psychological development we could learn to identify with other humans, with animals and plants, and even ecosystems. We could come to see ourselves in these other creatures, and in that way, they become part of our being. By identifying with the natural world, we *want* to protect it; we are not acting against our inclinations (Næss, 2005).

Fig 4.
Robert Hooke’s drawing (1665) of a flea observed through a microscope.



AESTHETICS AND THE PATTERN THAT CONNECTS

In his book *Mind and Nature* (1979), Gregory Bateson suggested a different way of understanding and relating to nature—not by taking it down to its tiniest bits and analysing those, but by going in the other direction—by studying relationships and patterns. He would ask rather unorthodox questions, like, “What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose, and all four of them to me? And me to you?” (2002 edition, p. 8). In his search of this pattern that connects all living creatures, Bateson was very interested in the contributions art can make. He believed that the purposive, logical mind needed correction from dreams, art, and poetry. Expression through the arts was considered by him to be the most honest and pure form of human communication, his daughter Nora Bateson recounts in her documentary film, *An Ecology of Mind*. And she adds, “It’s easy to forget that when we find meaning in a story or enjoy the beauty of a piece of music, we are engaging in the realm of thinking that is most in sync with nature. Metaphor is the language of relationships, the language of natural systems, in which there is room to communicate in spectrums of possibility, instead of tightly defined cul-de-sacs” (Bateson, 2010).

Gregory Bateson asked, “Why do schools teach almost nothing of the pattern which connects? Is it that teachers know that they carry the kiss of death which will turn to tastelessness whatever they touch or teach anything of

real-life importance? Or is it that they carry the kiss of death *because* they dare not teach anything of real-life importance? What’s wrong with them? Bateson claimed that aesthetics, ultimately, is the sensibility to the ‘pattern that connects’ (2002 edition, pp. 8, 118). This sensibility—which in some sense could be seen as an expression of artistic intelligence—is the ability to perceive connections, commonalities, or shared properties between different elements of reality and different levels of reality, at different levels of abstraction.

MINDFUL SCHIZOPHRENIA

Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald famously suggested a test for what he called ‘first-rate intelligence’ (1936). Its trial, he held, was “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” One should, for example, “be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.” A little more than a century earlier, the Romantic poet John Keats came to a similar idea, which he called ‘negative capability’, in a letter he wrote to his brothers in 1817. Asking himself what quality went to form a ‘Man of Achievement’—such as, for example, Shakespeare—he came to realise that such a man is, first and foremost, “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 1899). Basically, it is the ability to accept that not everything can be resolved. Keats had a high regard for receptive intuition, for which the intellectual self could stand in its way. Negative capability can be understood as an ability to contemplate the world without the desire to try to reconcile contradictory aspects: embracing uncertainty and ambiguity and being willing to live with mystery. What this requires is being able to remain in a state of restlessness without at every instance impatiently looking for additional information.

One of the most-needed capacities perhaps of artistic intelligence in our time is the ability to practice what I have called ‘mindful schizophrenia’ (Van Boeckel, 2021). Embracing the concurrence of a multiplicity of two or

more distinct or even contradictory voices can perhaps be appreciated as a form of mindful schizophrenia (understood not in its clinical meaning of a mental disorder that is characterised by significant alterations in perception, thoughts, mood, and behaviour, but in its—now defunct—original meaning of ‘a split mind’). The mindfulness consists of accepting being engaged in situations and practices that are (or appear to be) in contradiction with each other, but to do so with one’s full awareness: exercising the practice of deliberately bringing one’s attention in the present moment without judgment: to be concerned with beauty, with aesthetics, and to *simultaneously* be able to look into the abyss of the mounting meta-crisis in which we find ourselves, and to not turn away from it.

Fig 5.
An image of mindful schizophrenia:
Baron Münchhausen pulling himself
out of a mire by his own hair. Etching
by Gustave Doré, ca. 1862.



This is often regarded as an ‘either-or’. Either you withdraw from the world and embrace a romantic illusion of purity, an unspoiled beauty, or you become a full-time eco-activist, totally absorbed by and preoccupied only (albeit for good reasons) with this urgent horizon. The idea is that one cannot embrace both positions. However, James Hillman personified that one in fact may seek to inhabit the paradox by engaging the ecological crisis as—in its roots—an *aesthetic* crisis. And his point of departure is revisiting what it means to ‘take in’, or breathe in, the world. For beauty, to Hillman, in essence means “the form of what is presented, that which is breathed in, *aisthesis*, and by which the value of each particular thing strikes the heart, the organ of aesthetic perception, where judgments are heartfelt responses, not merely critical, mental reflections” (Hillman, 2021, p. 37).

This link between heart and the organs of sense is not simple mechanical sensationalism; it is aesthetic. That is, the activity of perception or sensation in Greek is aisthesis, which means at root ‘taking in’ and ‘breathing in’—a ‘gasp’ that primary aesthetic response. [...] What is it to ‘take in’ or breathe in the world? First, it means aspiring and inspiring the literal presentation of things by gasping. The transfiguration of matter occurs through wonder. This aesthetic reaction, which precedes intellectual wonder, inspires the given beyond itself, letting each thing reveal its particular aspiration within a cosmic arrangement. [...] The aesthetic response saves the phenomenon, the phenomenon that is the face of the world. (Hillman, 2021, pp. 35–36).

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