

Above all, we seek enlightenment, but only ever find things

Herman greets me with an apology. He's arrived late to take me to the room I've rented in Kassel for the night, but an extra five minutes standing in the sun is fine by me. We walk.

As we go, we talk about Documenta. I'm keen to find out what a local thinks of all the fuss, and what it's like to live in Kassel when the circus isn't in town. Although he usually goes to see the shows, Herman hasn't been this time. It doesn't excite him and, in his own phraseology, Documenta is only for 'educated' people, who for him are people who have been to art school or studied aesthetics or philosophy, a demographic that excludes him. He insists that it's not for 'normal' people like him and that, in any case, he's been too busy renovating his kitchen to visit – maybe he'll go when he finishes. We walk past some of Beuys' *7000 Oak Trees* with their basalt columns which Herman points out to me enthusiastically. Each could be mistaken for a traffic bollard, sited as they are in the middle of a dual carriageway. "That was a great project – when art actually meant something to the people in Kassel and it's had a lasting impression on me." The action of planting these trees around town meant a lot to him, urban regeneration he has reaped the practical benefit of even if, considering the piece as a work of art, he remains unconvinced.

I mention that I am an artist; Herman asks what kind of things I make, commenting that he likes representational art the best because he likes artists to make the things that he is unable to make himself; artists should display a dexterity with materials surpassing the class of 'normal' people he feels he belongs to. By making things that look like other things, he can tell how accurate – how 'correct' – the piece of work is by comparison to the original. He repeats the German saying, 'Kunst kommt von Können...' – roughly translated as meaning that art is created by ('comes from') an ability or skill, just as the word *Kunst*, etymologically, is believed to come from the word *Können*, to be able to do something. For Herman and other 'normal' people, art is something personally, technically impossible – a painting or a sculpture so precisely copying nature, for example, that he would not have the skills to reproduce it himself. For Herman, art objects are created by *knowing how*, a practical skill and ability (at no stage does Herman mention anything like talent) that can reproduce images to a very high technical standard – a standard far above, and different in nature from, the mundane understanding of his renovated kitchen. *Knowing how* is a species of 'high craft', a knowledge of materials so intimate that they can be made to do whatever the maker wants, made to imitate nature and simultaneously convey their innermost feelings; a knowledge of how something works or can be made. Contemporary non-representational art, on the other

hand, is created through a process of *knowing that*; for Herman a dry and theoretical process that lessens the importance of aesthetic beauty or composition in favour of a purely intellectual engagement with an object. *Knowing that* is a way to excuse a lack of technical skill by using found materials (in Herman's eyes, always some kind of junk or refuse) to make an intellectual statement instead of an artistic one, and this is how he views the work in Documenta.

Herman is, I'm sure, not alone in his conviction. The idea that artists should be making objects that display an intimate and thorough knowledge of craft and skill – showing that they *know how to do something* – is, apart from suggesting a craving for a vanished role for artists that never actually existed, a useful method to separate art and art objects from all other spheres of human activity. Artists, in this view, are not 'normal' people; the same 'normal' people who do not have to try to think about art since it is hopelessly above their heads. Raised intellectually by education, patience and labour, an artist is made into a culturally rarefied, philosophical being, remote from reality and the cares of common folk. In this simple schema, art is an object that is so technically proficient as to be as correspondingly remote from everyday objects as the 'normal' people are from the artist who made it. Artists and art objects are sequestered in galleries and museums – or art events like Documenta – which can be visited or ignored by those same 'normal' folk who know a good painting when they see one, but are held apart from artistic manufacture and responsibility of engagement by a lack of *knowing how* to create anything similar. 'Normal' people do not possess the qualities of an artist – creativity, talent, education, whatever. 'Normal' people only have the ability of *knowing that*, the seemingly impoverished partner of practical training in the creation of art objects. If that were true, Herman's fiction of a binary society split between artists and people who are not artists would hold, and exhibitions, museums and events like Documenta would be totally inaccessible without years of training; all the people who come back claiming illumination would be lying.

I doubt many people within the visual arts would agree with Herman and his fracturing of artists into a segregated community. Visitors to art museums – especially in the UK, especially since museum entry fees were dropped – are overwhelmingly not art trained, and museum-going has become a national pastime on an unprecedented scale. 'Normal' people do visit art shows and they do enjoy them, they do think intelligently, emotionally and coherently about what they experience. Many people visit exhibitions (just as many people make, collect and display art objects) in order to experience reality in a different way – poetic, affecting, intellectual, humorous, entertaining – while being under no illusion that their reality changes in any way. Yet there is still a perceived and deep-rooted belief that artists are, in some way, special people. That we are removed from the 'real world' by a different way of living brought about by our ability to make things, to use a *knowing how* as well as the

knowing that which everyone can claim. The language around art's exhibition reinforces this; visitors or audiences come along to galleries to witness the works made by these specialist workers and require the presence of the artist-educator or interpretative materials to contextualise the work for them. In Germany, where the practice of exhibitions having public and school education projects is less pronounced (the current Documenta is the first to have a funded education strand as a part of its programme) it is the Kunstvermittler, literally art *mediators*, who run the education programmes in galleries and museums. A mediator stands in the middle, dividing something into two parts at the point where they are present; they must be a sensitive and neutral bridge between the opinions and positions of all sides, promoting understanding and collaboration between them. Bridges join together, but always by holding apart; the presence of the Kunstvermittler or artist-educator is a reminder that these audiences are perceived to be unqualified, unable or unwilling to think about art in the same way as an artist, that art is in need of interpretation as explanation and history, that an uneducated response is not a correct response. The existence of gallery education programmes serves as a constant reminder – and reinforcement – of a fictitious political and conceptual divide between people who make art and those who do not.

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What is to be done?

The question obscures a previous question and its response: should something be done? Yes. It further obscures: what does *doing something* mean? What are the circumstances that have provoked the question and confer its urgency? Its passive voice tells that whatever needs to be done, it won't be done by *me*. This is someone else's work – I simply point out its necessity. Who, then, is being asked to do something, and are they the right person to ask? Work is identified only for the responsibility of it to be put on another's shoulders.

The question forms the title of a pamphlet by Lenin from 1902 in which he calls for the socialist revolution – he is quite certain what is to be done and it will be grand, sweeping and dangerous, but in the end will usher in a new future for the benefit of everyone in the world. But will he do it? He cannot do it alone; his question must be answered but cannot be enacted by only himself. The ground has been prepared for revolution by many hands but the responsibility for this action (or, more likely, who should *begin*) remains uncertain. The period before this revolutionary change – before what is to be done is finally *done* – is troubled and troubling, full of vacillation and shifting certainties. In its original form, and at its original time of formulation, it is a question appropriate to Modernism's narratives of progress and inevitability, of persons unknown (self-)appointed to look after your better interests and bring out your better selves, asking questions whose answers are already a *fait accompli*, that

something will be done, that whatever it is you need not trouble yourselves about it, that all is for the best. All you have to do is go along with it and we'll all be fine – trust in us! The status quo is no longer a viable option. Someone has decided (even if you still don't know who it is, who these people are who shoulder your burden) and something needs to be done, to change, and for the better. In the arts, the change will come from within you, but we need to initiate it from without.

You need to pay attention. You need to listen, to understand, to read and think – for yourself. You listen to the Kunstvermittler who stand between you and art, for your own benefit interpreting and protecting you from the complexities of art, translating it into a language you can understand. They are the final limit of the art object, its last surface and the final false divide between 'art' and 'life'; the educated standing between 'normal' people and the crafted object, as Herman might perhaps think. Employing their education, Kunstvermittler are asked to encourage people to interact with the art beyond merely looking – to think about it, to move towards a fuller and more correct appreciation of this object, moving away from a simple pleasure in the *know how* of manufacture and proficiency you might otherwise be left with.

What is to be done? The final interpretative barrier must be overcome so you can reach the object – or idea, or image, or concept, or thought – alone. We ask in this way because the work is not ours; it is yours.

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I meet up with Hector at the Documenta-Halle café on my last day in Kassel. We drink coffee and talk.

He has been living in Kassel since the start of Documenta 12, and will remain there until it finishes, then move on to Hamburg. He loves that Documenta brings everyone from Kassel to the show; that school children, their parents, workers in shops, all the normal people from the whole city come down to see it. I admit that the Aue Pavilion had me mystified – such an 'uncurated' selection of work, some of it seemingly placed together because of such (in?)formal criteria as colour or shape. "That's the whole point! But although some of it is placed in that way, quite relaxed, there are other juxtapositions involved as well that take a lot of time to think about. It all takes a lot of work."

A particular favourite of Hector's is, for me, one of the most intriguing aspects of the Documenta education programme – the so-called Palmenhain dotted particularly throughout the Aue Pavilion but present, in some form, in all venues. These comprise various configurations of elaborately made, perhaps Chinese, wooden chairs in which visitors are free

to sit and discuss the exhibition, aesthetics or other ideas that have come to them when walking through the show; or simply, and most usually, to rest on their long day's hike. In the English translation on the gallery guide, Palmenhain are rendered as 'Circles of Enlightenment' rather than the literal 'Palm Groves', showing the different philosophies behind education programming within German- or English-speaking contexts. The symbolism of the palm grove, as a place for assembly, of sacred rites and mysteries, of craft and learning and mastery; the modern symbol of the tropical paradise holiday, relaxation, luxury and relief; both are appropriate to the marking out of these spaces for normal people talking about normal things – art, aesthetics, philosophy, life, the weather, the ache in their feet from walking through 6 hours of art. In contrast, the obviously meditational 'Circle of Enlightenment' places the stress on individual labour, of working alone with an object in contemplation, or bringing it within the educated realm of a singular consciousness.

Hector enthuses about how exciting it is to see people talking with strangers about the exhibition, works of art or philosophy, about how the education programme of Documenta is so visible in comparison to the usual education workshops with schools in separate studios. Carmen Mörsch, artist, Kunstvermittlerin and freelance education consultant for Documenta writes about the importance of the Palmenhain's visibility, challenging the hidden nature of education programmes, making 'art education itself ... an exhibit; making its functions, its forms and maybe even its historicity negotiable.' The Palmenhain ensure that education, or mediation, are both visible and visioning, seeing and being seen. They enclose a space usually kept away from the area of the exhibition, making permanent the normally temporary boundaries represented by the bodies and activity of the Kunstvermittler and at the same time remove the need for these boundaries. They enact mediation as a participatory spectacle where, crucially, anyone is permitted at any time in a space without hierarchies. Mediation, in this way, gives way to a much older sense of education; a sense of drawing out of latent ideas and knowledge within a body of group knowledge and an understanding of the importance and equality between *knowing how* with *knowing that*.

I admit that I didn't see anyone talking in the Palmenhain unless they were with one of the Kunstvermittler, or in a group of friends, but the potential of dialogue between visitors without mediation is a radical direction to take a public programme, going against the received methodologies of interpretation and placing the responsibility of looking on the viewer. Also interesting is the multiplicity of these chairs – never positioned to allow one to one conversation, the Palmenhain force dialogue to be in a group and absolutely refute the notion that a gallery is a solitary space for individual enlightenment. But the potential of the Palmenhain is not fulfilled – in the end, although they give us the *space* to talk and interact with both other visitors and the art on display, they do not give us the *tools* with which to explore or work.

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What is to be done? All we ever find in art galleries are things even as we seek enlightenment. That's all we ever expect to find, and their presence hangs over our judgment before we even have the time to judge. If all we find are things, if all we ever think about are things and how we feel about *them*, what chance has *my* enlightenment to begin? Perhaps I should stop looking for things and start seeking enlightenment on my own.

Bibliography / Notes

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The title for this essay came from the Gonzalo Díaz piece in Documenta's Neue Galerie, 'WIR SUCHEN UBERALL DAS UNBEDINGTE UND FINDEN IMMER NUR DINGE', translation author's own.

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