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TO ART, OR NOT TO ART, THAT IS THE QUESTION

A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect,
it has something which is essentially anonymous about it.
It imitates the anonymity of Divine art.
— Simone Weil¹

The Herculean task of defining art across the centuries has been a preoccupation that can be compared to Sisyphus' rolling of the boulder up the hill. The climax is reached, and for a span of time, the task is achieved: the definition has been finally captured. Yet this phase is short lived: the semantics reveal to be insufficient; the deficiencies emerge in full throttle; and the illusion shatters. The boulder rolls back down, and the process recommences once again, possibly in vain. This short reflection will not attempt to enlist and analyse the attempts of the various theorists who have sought to provide a conceptual framework on the subject, no matter how useful they may be. Heavily influenced by apophatic thought, this contribution will proceed by providing a 'definition' (for lack of a better word), through the process of negation. In brief, art cannot be defined. It can only be experienced, and linguistic tools cannot do justice to such an experience. Nonetheless, this reflection will make use of select thoughts taken from the apophatic spirituality of the French philosopher, Simone Weil (1909–1943) on art to grapple with some provocations that this mystic offers and which can empower the artist to discern whether the work that he² is engaged in is truly artistic.

An understanding of the notion of the absent is imperative in Simone Weil's vision on the artistic process, and is indeed the starting point for this analysis. The

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¹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 149.

² To avoid making the text heavy for the sake of political correctness, the masculine pronoun will be used in reference to the artist, with the awareness that this pronoun can be replaced by any other that the reader identifies with.

notion of the absent is rooted in Weil's Theology of Creation: The Almighty created the world by withdrawing and allowing the space to be.³ In her perception, creation implies retraction as opposed to action. The artist needs to follow on the same path: he needs to withdraw so that the space for the other can be created. In the context of the artistic process, the other is the viewer or spectator who engages with the artistic work or artefact. If the presence of the artist clutters this space, there will not be the possibility of an encounter. The artist who decides to inhabit the space after the creation of the artefact is only satiating his gratification. He is not genuinely interested in communicating, but in enforcing himself onto the other. The role of the artist is to develop a void, through his work, where a genuine meeting with the other can occur.⁴ Hence, the overarching paradigm in Weil's thoughts on the subject is that a work of art should never be a means of identification or indulgence for its creator.

The artistic process towards authenticity and the shedding of the illusionary is referred to by Simone Weil as *creative attention*, that is the faculty of creating that which does not exist.⁵ The risk in art is to churn out an amplification of the self. In such cases, the work of art becomes implicitly or explicitly an extension of the artist. There is no newness in such work, but a replica of what already existed. This creates a barrier in the communication with the recipient. Like the *Summus Creator*, the artist needs to create anew by being brave enough to remove all gimmicks and enter the void himself before being able to engage with his viewers. This presents a double challenge to the artist. Not only according to Weil he needs to 'disappear' as soon as the work is complete, but even *a priori*, he cannot make use of himself as a springboard for creation. Stripped from his past, his baggage, and his desires, what is available to the artist to be able to create? And why is there the need of what seems to be such excessive martyrdom and self-annihilation in the process? The stamina and will to be able to engage artistically in such a way is undoubtedly laborious. But it is equally liberating, allowing the artist to be free to surrender completely to the stimuli, human or otherwise, around him, and to react accordingly. The empty space that the artist is in allows him to be aware of his environment and react accordingly. It is this reaction to the stimuli that gives birth to art. The artist is to remain anonymous throughout the entire process. It is this anonymity that prevents the imposition

³ Simone Weil, "Cahier VI," in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers*, vol. VI: *La Science et l'Impensable (septembre 1941 – février 1942)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 403.

⁴ Simone Weil, "Dieu dans Platon," in *Écrits de Marseille*, Vol. II: *Grèce-Inde-Occitanie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 125.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 136.

of ipseity from destroying the truth of the relationship.⁶ The impersonal, or the anonymous, makes it possible for the artist to concentrate on the relationality of the process whereas the personal blocks the same process since the wounds of the past, as well as the anxiety of the unknown future, avert his focus. Anonymity shifts the attention from the egocentric self to the other.

This anonymity infers that art is not didactic. It bridges and communicates without being categorical or dogmatic. Paradoxically, the purpose of art is “purposiveness that excludes purpose”.⁷ Although it has a direction, the objective of the artist is not to deliver a message, at least not a direct one. Otherwise this creates an unhealthy and unbalanced power dynamic, with the ‘artist’ at the top, dictating to the other what he should believe or do. Didacticism presumes that the initiator of the communicative act is more knowledgeable than the receiver. It incumbers the space with the ‘knowledge’ that the artist wants to impose onto the learner. The dearth of dialogue is evident in this approach. Weil speaks about the mystery of silence that all genuine works of art have.⁸ The voice of silence transcends words and is as poignant as volumes of written or spoken material. When an artistic work has too clear a meaning or interpretation, it loses this poignancy.

Another salient feature that can be deduced is that art is a ‘here-and-now’ experience. As soon as the moment of relationality in the void is established, it is lost forever, never to be reiterated, despite any form of human intervention. Even in art forms, such as photography or the visual arts, where the product is finalised, the moment of the encounter is unique, and no two reactions can ever be duplicated. The artist might try to extend the moment. The viewer might try to reengage in the hope of reproducing an identical experience. This only augments the frustration and highlights the incapability further.⁹ Weil speaks about the gaze that cannot be prolonged and that cannot be acted upon. The beauty of art can only be gazed and contemplated. Beauty should not be contaminated by the needs of the ego of the perceiver.¹⁰ This perspective is interesting because it is highlighting the responsibility of the recipient in the artistic relationship. The artist who allows himself to detach is placing himself in a situation of vulner-

⁶ Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 19-20.

⁷ Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 100.

⁸ Simone Weil, “De la Perception ou l’aventure de Protée,” in *Œuvres Complètes: Premiers Écrits Philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 137-8.

⁹ Martin Steffens, “«Par le renoncement, nourris-toi»,” in *Simone Weil*, ed. Emmanuel Gabellieri and François L’Yvonnet (Paris: L’Herne, 2014), 378-9.

¹⁰ Simone Weil, “Cahier X,” in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers*, vol. VI: *La Porte du Transcendant (février 1942- juin 1942)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 368.

ability, and this could be easily taken advantage of. The artist is trusting that the other will partake in the same journey, an assumption that, unfortunately, has its risks and does not necessarily yield its fruit. This, however, should not denote that the artistic relationship should be avoided, lest it be too dangerous or harmful. Beauty can only exist when the 'I' ceases to be.¹¹ There is no other way of experiencing beauty.

Building further on these dynamics, art is consequently a bridge to the Transcendent.¹² The void generated by the artistic encounter becomes a trajectory that leads the viewer to experience a superior realm. Through the removal of all that is excessive and illusionary, the spectator finds himself in a space where he becomes aware of his thirst for authenticity and profundity. The work of art is an invitation to journey even more intensely into this void. The artist is asking the spectator to undergo the same process he went through: in baring his soul and becoming 'invisible', thus removing any form of personal agenda, the artist is using the work of art to motivate the spectator to detach himself and probe deeper. A cyclical pattern can thus be observed. The Divine releases the space and gives it to humanity. The artist lets go of himself and allows the stimuli in the space to generate creativity. The viewer experiences this space and surrenders to the Divine through the engagement with the artistic work. Art is ultimately an experience of relationality that stems from the Divine and leads back to the Divine.

This position on art might come across as ambiguous. It does not offer a textbook definition but instead delves into the artistic process to eradicate the hurdles that stifle authenticity from being reached. If there are two words that could succinctly summarise this, these would be honesty and relationality. Art is a relational endeavour that finds its meaning and significance when the artist is ready to be honest and leap into the void. Certainly, it is daunting. There seems to be no safety harness to protect him. He is totally naked and totally defenceless. Yet, as the artist painstakingly perseveres in such a journey, a depth is attained that elevates the work to an encounter with the other that is beautiful and humbling. This is undoubtedly the crux of the creative act.

¹¹ Martin Steffens, "«Par le renoncement, nourris-to»,» in *Simone Weil*, ed. Emmanuel Gabel-lieri and François L'Yvonnet (Paris: L'Herne, 2014), 381.

¹² Simone Weil, "Cahier X," in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers*, vol. VI: *La Porte du Transcendant (février 1942- juin 1942)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 278.

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