

How have you been? It's been ages since we last talked or even e-mailed. I really miss those conversations. As you know, I'm not too much into the small talk business and instead prefer the occasional very long and, ideally, intimate exchanges that start from nowhere and slowly acquire layers, exploring all kinds of nooks and niches, drawing you into this state of deep play. It's increasingly harder for me to find suitable "dialogue partners" or even occasions for such exchanges. Perhaps I haven't been really looking. Anyways, I just wanted to say I miss you.

While gathering thoughts about what to write to you, I've been thinking about what I've been up to these days. In contrast to the brutal events going around in nearby Ukraine, I'm having a hard time coming up with anything significant. Basically, I've just been typing a huge bunch of words on my computer.

Many of these words have gone into my upcoming Ph.D. thesis. It's still not very clear where it wants to go. I started with quite a specific plan, at least for my standards. And then it took off in a completely different direction. As you know, I'm a big fan of Witold Gombrowicz, who has wonderful pages about this. A writer starts writing a draft for his novel, and the first sentences happen to be in heroic tones. This compels him to add even more heroic sentences, fashion the plot in heroic lines, etc. Later, having published the novel, the writer can't bring himself to admit he'd just stumbled on this tone. So, he pretends he's a heroic *person*. Eventually, he doesn't even need to pretend.¹

To be honest, this is what I dislike the most about writing: having to "defend your thoughts" and "own them" later. They're not really mine, are they? They're as much mine as a cat can be mine. Yet, I know people who still think this way—writing as an expression of oneself.

I'm increasingly treating thoughts as if they're materials. Not in the sense that they obey you and you shape them as you want. Being a master and all. For me, materials are defined by their particular ways of offering resistance and their particular wills or *tastes*, in the sense of what they agree or disagree with and what they are seeking or avoiding. Thoughts themselves *want* to go somewhere. You only have to listen. There's a lovely article by John Berger where he talks about negotiating with his sentences: they complain, you adjust them, they complain some more, until there is this murmur of approval.²

Craftspeople know all about the will of the materials. They also know a thing or two about hands. I mean, these things go hand-in-hand, don't they? In my thesis, I've been toying around with this idea of hands in the extended sense. If words and thoughts are materials, then I surely need hands to touch them, and by touching them, understand where they'll want to go.

I love how designer David Pye has written about it: doing something "by hand" has nothing to do with whether you use machines or not. The more relevant question is whether anything can go wrong in the process. If a lot can go wrong, we have what he calls workmanship of risk. If nothing can go wrong,

it's workmanship of certainty.³ Although my dentist mainly uses machines, she's certainly engaged in workmanship of risk. I'd like to hope the same could be said about me.

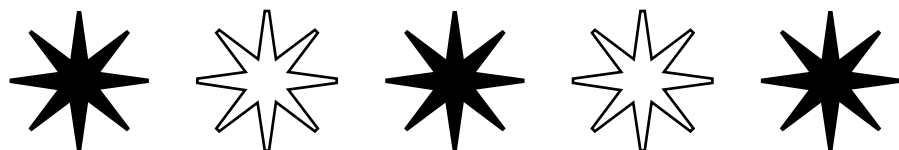
I don't remember if I ever told you that I used to take courses from the local massage school. Perhaps this is why it really pisses me off when people still oppose hands and minds. At its most basic level, massage is really easy, and everybody should know how to do it. But you sure have to *think-feel* all the time when giving a massage, and you have to *know* a lot—about bodies *and* souls—to do it really well. On the other side, good writing has the ability to touch you, and being engaged in it surely feels like a hands-on activity.

I'm tired of these stupid games of social status where it's always those who allegedly work with their minds who are more important than those who work with their hands. It's not only childish, but it also denies the hand-mind connection. This has been quite poisonous for our collective imagination, I think. Of course, the connection has always been there. People have always listened to their materials, their hands, but also to their environments and legs. They've had to. Most ideas reside exactly in those things, not in our heads. But it has been really hard to explore this connection consciously, as the high intellect *obviously* has no need for the lowly hands.

That's why I'm excited about the initiative we're preparing with my colleagues at the Estonian Academy of Arts—the Draftlab. The idea is to focus on the making processes of all kinds of disciplines, whether in arts, crafts, design, architecture, or theory and on the "scaffoldic" forms used for supporting those activities in their formative stages—sketches, prototypes, models, etc. The hope is to get some cross-pollination going on between the fields.

Looking back and reading what I've just written, I guess one phrase that stitches these themes together is dialogic open-endedness. While some writers have to know the last sentence of their novel before they can start writing, I need my writing to be open-ended—be more about opening and exploring things than about closing them, putting them in place. I hope to accomplish the same with my teaching: find ways of touching my students—not literally, of course, but also not only intellectually—in the hope of activating in them *their* materiality. But this open-endedness has to be dialogic in the sense that I also don't want to be "a slave to my materials," just blindly following where they want to go. My handmind should also have a say. Sometimes the materials have the upper hand, sometimes the handmind, with all sides playfully resisting and flirting with each other, giving rise to surprises. This is how I want to live.

How about you?



HUGS!
EIK HERMANN