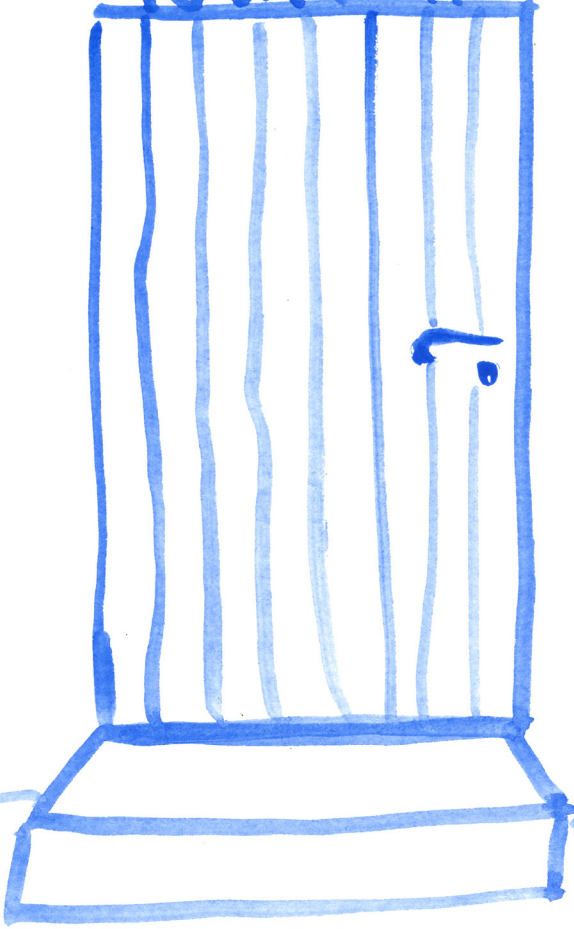


YOUR WAY



# This is Your Way

by Finn Janning

Late one August evening in a small provincial town, a woman steps out her front door. In her hand, she holds a slim leather briefcase, probably containing a laptop. When she steps down from the small landing in front of the door, a mild breeze fills the air, gently tousling her long blond tresses. She tries to pull her hair back behind her ears without any luck. From the back pocket of her jeans she pulls out a bandeau and ties those unruly locks into a simple ponytail. Now, with no hair interrupting her vision, she looks first to the right and then to the left before turning around to lock the door behind her. After checking twice that the door is indeed locked, she rotates to face the street for a second time.

This time she looks to the left first. Actually, at this point, her whole body shifts as she evaluates the possibility of going in that direction.

*Is this the right way?*

Going left isn't necessary, of course. She could also turn to the right, and there is the possibility of going straight. She might visit one of her neighbors in the building across from her own. For a moment, she doesn't move. She just stands there, facing left.

There is nothing extraordinary in this scene: a woman leaving her home. Or perhaps there is—for it also depicts a woman standing still.

Now she turns around to face the door. Again. She grasps the handle. Again.

*Insecurity? Memory lapse? Obsessive-compulsive disorder?*

She looks over her shoulder to the left while facing the door. Then a quick gaze to the right before she opens door and goes in. Again.

She doesn't come back out.

\* \* \*

Have you ever felt alienated from reality? Perhaps it's not fair to ask so bluntly. I should be more specific. What does it mean to feel alienated? What is a feeling? Is it really yours, or something that passes through you? What is reality?

Let me re-frame the questions by referring back to the classically existential opening scene of this essay: a woman (or a man) not knowing which way to go. Try to put yourself in her shoes. You stand there in front of your front door, incapable of deciding where to go. At that particular moment, it makes just as much sense to jump up and down as to turn left, right, return home, or simply sit down. Is this experience alienating? Frustrating? Perhaps. Feeling frustrated, however, is something that passes, and the woman isn't conscious of the particular feeling she is experiencing. Although it has an undoubtedly effect on her in this particular situation. She probably feels that she can make it go away by returning to a place where she feels more comfortable.

Still, the alienation or frustration becomes more than

a passing feeling, to the point where she can't ignore it. It colors her life. As she stands there in front of her door, it overwhelms her, paralyzes her. It's as if she can't do what she wishes to do, as if she's restricted to live within certain zones, to follow only previously outlined paths, to go backward and forward, repeating the same pattern over and over. No wonder she's frustrated.

Most of us have experienced something similar. Not on a daily basis, of course, and perhaps not in such an extreme way. Nonetheless, at times, we (or I at least) are not sure where to go. We feel lost and somehow estranged, disconnected or detached from what is happening. Germans have a word for this alienating feeling: *unheimlich*. Literally, it is not feeling at home, a feeling that is 'not homey,' whereas *heimlich* conjures up the comfort and security of home.

It was Sigmund Freud who, in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, brought the *unheimlich* concept into our psychological sphere as a frightening or peculiar combination of the familiar and unfamiliar.<sup>1</sup> We can find numerous examples of this mixture in literature and art—for example, the moment when an encounter with a new work opens our mind to a new production of sense as well as to questioning how significant what we experience is. Do we dare embrace it and leave behind what we previously took for granted?

The woman encounters or senses something that hinders her forward motion—something unknown that produces anxiety. The uncertainty is shattering. She's

1 S. Freud (2001): *Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 17*. Vintage Classics.

worried because it undermines the pretense that she has control over her life—but of course, no one fully controls her or his own life.

The problem with anxiety is that it can't provide any security; anxiety can't guide us regarding whether a decision is right or wrong. The same is true for fear. On the contrary, fear and anxiety mostly lead to short-term decisions. Politicians display this every day but parents are a good example as well. For instance, it isn't always good to forbid your children from doing certain things out of fear or anxiety—worrying isn't the same as caring. It may only illustrate your own fears, which you pass on to them.

Apparently, the woman on the doorstep lacks trust. Trust is a bridge to the future. The future is more or less unpredictable, and yet it is in the process of coming into being. How can we live with it? Become part of it?

\* \* \*

Let's recapitulate: the woman from our little story is leaving something familiar: her home. To use a common idiomatic expression, home is within her comfort zone. It goes without saying that she may be comfortable with certain unfamiliar things or find them exciting, exotic, unusual, etc.—especially if such exotic things are freely chosen. As Freud writes, "some new things are frightening, but not all by any means."

The artist John Cage once said, "I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I am doing." What makes him different from our woman is that he chose unfamiliarity. However, in other situations, feelings of unfamiliarity or displacement

have nothing exotic about them. These feelings can be difficult to accept—as are most things that are beyond our control.

Art is effective at exhibiting the fragility of borders we use to navigate among zones of familiarity, comfort, or distress. It also provides ways of expanding those zones. For example, when the artist Jeppe Hein puts our breath at the center of much of his work, he illustrates how all of us stand in a particular relationship to one another. For instance, *Breathing Watercolours* is an *in situ* series comprised of wide, blue brush-strokes that cover several walls with repetitive patterns of vertical stripes. Each brush-stroke resembles a breath; it starts from an intense blue and gradually fades out, which communicates how we resonate with life as well as that each breath is unique. None of the brush-strokes are identical. We can only repeat what is different—identity is an illusion.

Breathing to sustain life is something that you and I have in common. The more we acknowledge that we have something vital in common—the air we all share—the larger our shared world becomes. I can only grow as a human being through my relationship with the others. The woman who stands on her doorstep feels alienated because she is alone, unconnected with the world. This is what makes her experience uncanny.

Nicholas Royles defines *unheimlich* (or uncanny) as “the experience of oneself *as* a foreign body.”<sup>2</sup> The woman can’t recognize herself as she stands in front of her door, incapable of making the simplest of decision: left, right, or

2 N. Royles (2003): *The Uncanny*. Manchester University Press.

straight. However, it is not the options as such that paralyze her; rather, it is her relationship with this particular situation where she feels like her body and mind are elsewhere—somewhere yet to be located. She turns around and goes back inside in search of her physical and mental self.

Getting to know yourself better not only requires being capable of taking care of yourself but also knowing your place, that is, where you stand in your particular life and in relation to life itself.

Why do you do what you do and not something else?  
What is your relationship with life?

\* \* \*

Philosophy begins by isolating a problem: for example, a feeling of being lost. Art shares this with philosophy. It destroys our tendency to look at meaning as something given; instead, it confronts us with several questions that only the viewer can answer: What does it open us up to? Which feelings does it evoke? Is it meaningful? If so, in what ways?

Philosophy and art do not present any universal model to solve the problems they focus on. This is left for us to do ourselves as we experience, empathize, and interact with a philosophical or artistic work; yet, this ongoing investigation of the perplexities of life and our relationship to them can help us overcome the problems we experience. It can present us with alternative approaches to life, just as when we are lost, we may find our way again by engaging with our surroundings, for instance, by asking for help.



Philosophy is an ongoing exploration that aims at differentiating possible forms of life from necessary ones. Just because something is possible doesn't mean that it is necessary. Similarly, just because I can be unfaithful to my wife (and vice versa) does not mean that I should. To philosophize is to question what we take for granted. This capacity to wonder goes hand in hand with the capacity to imagine that things could be different. So, when we encounter the woman in front of her door, we wonder; we imagine that she may have forgotten something, she may be going back inside due to a noise, she may even suffer from anxiety, and so forth. We tend to look for a meaningful explanation, although many things in life really can't be explained. Life doesn't come to us in neat little meaningful boxes; living is something far more intensive.

"Lived experience," said the psychiatrist Félix Guattari, "does not mean sensible qualities. It means intensification. 'I feel that' means that something is happening inside me."<sup>3</sup> If the woman is feeling alienated, unnatural, or strange, it's as if she literally passes "beyond a threshold of intensity with her body." This experience can be both scary as well as liberating. What scares her is actually her own desire to respond in an already given meaningful way, whereas what is liberating is to be impassive and follow the flow of life.

How can we free ourselves and become what we are capable of being?

\* \* \*

3 F. Guattari (2008): *Chaosophy: Texts and Interview 1972-1977*. Semiotext(e).

All philosophical and artistic scrutiny takes place in a social and cultural setting. Even the famous philosopher René Descartes, who sat by himself in front of the fire thinking about what it means to be certain, was, at the same time, thinking with and against all the philosophers before him. “I think, therefore I am” requires certain ideas about what it means to think and what it means to be, just as a basic understanding of certainty and doubt is required. Another example, take the Buddhist monk sitting alone in a cave; he or she is also a part of a Buddhist heritage and as such is there for a reason provided by it, be it to achieve enlightenment or, at the very least, some peace of mind.

With regard to the social element, perhaps philosophizing or artistic exploration is the best protection from today’s malady of narcissism. It is our own narcissism—our obsessive ego-trip—that alienates us from life. This detachment causes depression and burnout. The woman on the doorstep, for example, would be much more comfortable with her uncertainty and feelings of fear if she could sense that she lived in a world where people were in solidarity with one another. Solidarity is not an agreement about how one should live one’s life; rather, it is a sense of being together in this world, right here and right now. It’s the kind of bond or fellowship among potentially quite different people, perhaps as varied as the hobbits, men, elf, dwarf, and wizard who made up that famous fellowship in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

This solidarity or fellowship stands in stark contrast to the identity politics that dominate our era. Today, nearly every group has or claims to have a special and

unique identity rooted in gender, sexuality, religion, etc. This constant branding campaign of identities not only overshadows our commonalities but hinders us—all of us—from making connections. All identities are constructions that can be used for manipulation and seduction, as well as for security and belonging.

The first step in dismantling identities is to expose the motive behind them. What impels you toward this identity? Why do you identify with it? Are you a vegetarian due to the moral status or does your vegetarianism arise out of caring for the environment? Do you seek a prosperous career because it is fulfilling or because it is the easiest way to gain prestige and status?

Once we question our motivation, we gradually come into contact with our intentions for doing what we do. Our intentions are the motives that we are consciously aware of. Nietzsche wrote of the will to power, referring to our creative or innovative will to actualize our potential—a drive marks us with an unquestionable intensity. Such intensity, far from being a spontaneous flirt, is rather based on a thorough examination of the levels of joy and sadness in our lives. We create room for what we are in the process of becoming by being aware of what affects us, how it affects us, with what intensity, and for how long.

This existential scrutiny is characteristic of art. For example, Jeppe Hein's work is the offspring of his reflections on and experience of being a human being. Part of his art focuses on him, what he feels and does, etc. Another part reaches out to the viewer, where his personal investigation becomes an analysis of contemporary culture. The

interesting part is not what he feels, thinks, and does but rather how we feel, think, and act while interacting with his work.

\* \* \*

In 2009, Jeppe Hein was diagnosed with burnout, a story I have told in the book, *The Happiness of Burnout*. Burnout and depression are often, as already mentioned, the result of narcissism. Hein worried too much about who he was, how other people saw him, what they thought of him, etc. It made him run faster and faster. This went on until one day he stood still, paralyzed, caught by an uncanny feeling of unbelonging in his own body. He lived his life in what Sartre called “bad faith” by being overly focused on directing his life and art in ways that he knew would yield status and prestige. He wanted to be loved by everyone and ran up against the dilemma that everyone equals no one.

Today, his project is much more social, and generous; it reaches out, it is outwardly directed, and it passes on ideas that other people may find useful and stimulating in their efforts to live a life worth living.

In Buddhist literature, you will find the idea that if you expect nothing, you are open to everything. It is a creative and explorative approach to life. “I expect nothing, but I am open to everything” is an approach to life that inspires Hein. He tries to live by that motto as he forms or reforms his self.

For Hein, the years since his breakdown have ushered in a profound spiritual change through daily yoga and meditation. He has discovered that love, empathy, and

compassion are more than mere words but rather things that have to be cultivated. Empathy, for example, doesn't grow like fingernails; it must be trained. This process is present in his work, which still interacts with its viewer in an unpretentious and funny way, but now it emphasizes to a much greater degree the immaterial or metaphysical part of his recovery. As Hein once told me, "I think all problems are spiritual by nature." To some extent, he wants to awaken the viewer through his work. This ambition, can be provocative, morally uplifting, or stimulating—and probably all three can be experienced simultaneously.

Many people who turn to Buddhism, mindfulness, and yoga—as many people do today—have a tendency to turn inwards. It can sometimes be difficult to see whether this transformation is just another form of egoism. For this reason, it can be difficult to implement spiritual change on a public or social level, for example, through teaching. The idea is, of course, that many small cases of change gradually combine to bring about a greater change.

This optimistic outlook notwithstanding, one of the most repeated mistakes when it comes to understanding meditation is to see it as mere navel-gazing. It is decidedly not. Meditation is a method to still the mind—to stop it from drifting hither and thither. This is achieved by withdrawing from our attachments to this world. The problem with our attachments is that they cause suffering due to the underlying metaphysic of change. If everything is impermanent, then even the things we care about and do not want to see change will ineluctably do so. Once we stop the mind's inclination to attach itself to titles, money, people, products, fame, looks or

various desires, this attachment gradually disappears, and we find ourselves better equipped to follow life and not our desires. It becomes easier to go where life takes us.

In a typical meditation, the mediator focuses on his or her breathing; however, this is not to neglect the surrounding world. On the contrary, it is a way of letting go of your attachment to the ,outside' world. This element of letting go is present in many of Hein's newer works that illustrate breathing as a brush-stroke on a wall or as an invitation to inhale, hold, and exhale following the rhythm of a neon light, as in *INHALE HOLD EXHALE* from 2016. Here, the artist turns into a mother holding the viewers hand while the two breathe together for a while.

The whole idea of inside versus outside is rather problematic. We are all formed by the outside. Each inhalation is a way of taking the outside inside ourselves. When we exhale, we are letting our inside turn into something outside. However, when does the air that I inhale shift from belonging to the outside and become a part of my inside, and vice versa? The question can't be answered, as it would be a suicidal idea to take permanent ownership of the air that you inhale. Without exhaling, you can't inhale, and without inhaling, you will die.

The moral is: Everything is interrelated.

\* \* \*

To understand Hein's project, an understanding of interconnectivity or the principle of interconnectedness in nature is fundamental. If you truly expand your self to include

other human beings and living entities, altruism becomes unnecessary. The world becomes part of ,me'. Such ideas are part of most spiritual thinking and various philosophies—especially feminism and Eco-philosophies. For example, nature is not something “out there” but rather is a part of us, regardless of where we live. Nature is both everything and nothing; there is no primal state we can point to and say, “That’s nature!” For this reason, by placing Hein’s work in relation to existential philosophy, spirituality, and ecological thinking, I wish to suggest that his work is metaphysical rather than ethical (at least not in a strict normative way, although some would prefer to read it like that). It examines how we perceive and construct the world, and I would add—how we can construct a life without identities.

Let me clarify this claim:

All identities are like a prison, said Deleuze. He was right. Identities, regardless how much moral goodwill and status they add to you, are at the same time hindering you from becoming something else. Even yourself!

The problem is that all identities need an out-group to distinguish their in-group from the other. An enemy is created alongside the friendly identity. The banality of evil stems from this dualistic thinking.

Nietzsche held that he was all persons in history. People called him schizophrenic. Instead, they should have reflected on their own incapacity to be more than one. Yes, I may describe myself as a mindful philosopher, feminist, and ecologist, but I am at the same time those I oppose and becoming someone else—at least for a moment.

For example, President Donald Trump is both a sexist

and racist, two things I can't accept because they are founded in pure stupidity. No gender or race is better than any other. Still, I have to understand what made so many people put him in power. I will have to identify with those who believe in a patriarchal dominating culture where White men (and to a lesser extent, women) are supreme but do so in order to help them escape the prison they are in. In this process of understanding, I am at the same time dissolving identities, both my own and those of the subject of my studies. It is a transformation from self-making toward making-with. The ecological, racial, and sexual disaster that we live in today requires "sym-poiesis, or making-with, rather than auto-poiesis, or self-making," as Donna Haraway has stressed.<sup>4</sup> Instead of the opposition and the hierarchy that comes with identity, whether it is the opposition between men and women, human and nature, self and other, Black or White, what is needed is interdependence and proximity.

To put it simply: The woman who is still milling about her doorstep suffers from a feeling of alienation because she sees herself as having a certain identity, one that she will not allow to shatter completely and one that she doesn't trust or feel comfortable about changing. She holds on to something familiar, even though that causes feelings of unfamiliarity within her, and while she clings on to a certain identity, a particular idea about who she is or ought to be, she simultaneously makes herself less flexible toward what is also possible. She is restrained. She is not free to pursue or investigate the question: "Who am I capable of becoming?"

4 D.J. Haraway (2016): *Staying with the Trouble*. Duke University Press.



With this question, we contextualize the work of Jeppe Hein once again.

\* \* \*

In recent years, Hein's work has become clearer with regard to his artistic intentions. This comes from facing reality with honesty, courage, and kindness. What he wishes to achieve with his work is to initiate a shift from self-love to love-making, from ego to eco.

For the philosopher Nietzsche, the "self" is something we must achieve. The subtitle of his last book, *Ecce Homo*, is: *How one becomes what one is*. The American writer David Foster Wallace said something similar when he said in an interview, "You end up becoming yourself."<sup>5</sup> Yet, there is a difference.

Nietzsche tried to overcome the resignation that is present in Wallace's statement. If the self is not given beforehand, it must be achieved; therefore, the self has to be created, not discovered, and this creation is an ongoing process of change. Thus, if one of the guiding questions for most people truly is "Which life is worth living?", as I believe it is, then it can't be answered by asking "Who are you?"; rather, a more appropriate question would be "Who are you capable of becoming?"

I keep returning to this question not only due to its existential ties but also because it is the best way to describe what Hein is trying to ask through his work. For existential

5 D. Lipsky (2010): *Although of course you end up becoming yourself. A Roadtrip with David Foster Wallace*. Random House.

philosophers, philosophy is a way of living, or exemplifying the art of living. The same goes for Hein's artistic work. It too may be understood from an ethical perspective as presenting us with new possibilities of life, not unchangeable universal norms. Within this process, it also becomes, in a therapeutic way, an expansion of what you may be capable of.

Hein is a minimalist and a performer who would agree with the artist Marina Abramović's statement: "more and more of less and less." For this reason, breathing plays such an important role in Hein's newer work. It is how everything begins and ends. Who we might become, then, depends on how we relate to what takes place in-between our first inhale and our last. As he told me recently: "Most people are not even aware that they breathe." In other words, they are not aware that they are alive, that is to say, that they are constantly dying.

Abramović's sound installation *Sound Corridor (War)*, which was installed in the entrance to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in 1971, illustrates how more and more of less and less is desirable. All the visitors to this exhibition had to go through the corridor of blasting machine guns to get inside the museum. The corridor functioned as a passage, a ritual progression. According to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, such ritual passages consist of a three-part movement: separation from the everyday flow of activities (e.g., you leave the "outside" world behind when you enter the museum); a passage through a threshold liminal phase into a ritual world removed from everyday notions of time and space (i.e., the viewer passes through a white corridor with nothing else but the sound

of machine guns blasting. This place us squarely in the realm of “the uncanny”—imagine our former heroine, the woman from our story, running out of the corridor and out of the museum); and finally, the part where the viewer acknowledges what caused the separation (i.e., the corridor) and how it changes his or her take on the world as well as in what way he or she may incorporate this experience.

This is art in a concentrated form. It violates our view of the world and forces us to change it or at least rethink it. Similarly, I propose to see Hein’s work as metaphysical and as a re-examination of how we perceive and construct the world.

Another important element in Abramović’s work is, of course, that it illustrates how fragile we are. By bringing the sound of war into a museum, she at the same time elicits the fear that comes with it. She plays on the extremes: from the background noise of our everyday activities to the bombarding noise of gunfire entering the museum, to the relative silence of the museum. It is a disorientating experience to pass through, which is exactly the point. It strips the viewer naked and prepares him or her to interact without any expectations.

Hein, in a similar way—although he is less directly political—tries to achieve the same ends. He may not confront us with something as unfamiliar to most people as war, but he does confront us with something familiar that may make us feel unfamiliar to ourselves.

\* \* \*

As you enter the exhibition *Your Way* at Château la Coste, you are confronted by the work *Please*. It speaks to you directly in language that is both demanding and inviting: “Choose your Way,” “Be Aware,” “Do Yoga,” “Forgive.”

Revealing the entrance, it gently asks you: Please, choose your way, that is, find your balance, your comfort zones while interacting with the presented works. Do so by participating in a joyous way. Get involved by allowing yourself to feel, breathe, open up, smell, wish, be aware, dream, search, relax, touch, taste, be grateful, focus, meditate, love yourself, do yoga, forgive, try, interact, smile inside, kiss, wonder, expect a miracle.... Are there no limits?

The invitation combines all-too-familiar concepts with unfamiliar ones, particularly the final one mentioned in the list as what is a miracle other than what we find to be unexplainable and uncanny? Some may protest: Expect a miracle!? How does this fit with approaching art without expectations? Well, a miracle is completely unexpected—how could we possibly experience one with preconceived expectations?

Hein’s directions do not serve as a logical and stringent manual; some may argue that the collage is inconsistent or redundant, just as life is. They illustrate that balance is not a static concept but rather a dynamic one. Most importantly, they try to get you involved.

Once you enter, you experience how the artist is working both with himself and you. It is a laboratory where he shares how he came to be more flexible and open and how he is gradually trying, through concerted effort, to let go of his ego. We may forgive him when he fails or when we

can't follow him, because we sense that his intentions are good.

Let's dwell on three of the works from the Your Way exhibition:

*Cage and Mirror* (2011) is a large circus cage that looks like a birdcage with an extended entrance. In the center of the cage, a large rotating mirror reflects both the inside and outside of the cage, regardless of whether you stand inside or outside. Borders are destroyed! Identities dismantled!

When I first experienced this work, I was reading Rebecca Solnit's book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. In this book, she writes: "Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from."<sup>6</sup> I love the first part of the sentence, but I doubt whether the unknown has to be either dark or white. As a metaphor, these two tones are too damaged by history. It can be rather scary to look straight into the light, at least for me, which has nothing to do with enlightenment but everything to do with my personal sensibilities, which are usually flirting with a lurking migraine. Nevertheless, if we knew the color of the unknown, it wouldn't be unknown. Darkness still forces us to pay careful attention; as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Only when it's dark enough can you see the stars."<sup>7</sup> Darkness can teach us to see better, and more importantly, we can also learn to appreciate darkness, or the darker aspects of our own mood. Today, we live in the a bubble of positivity and happiness, as if life didn't consist of

6 R. Solnit (2017): *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Canongate.

7 From Martin Luther King Jr's speech, 3 April 1968, Memphis, Tennessee, USA.

anything negative. For example, one major problem is that happiness is often sold as something individual, although happiness comes from living, a more or less, a meaningful life together with other people.

*Cage and Mirror* obviously illustrates that being caged is a limitation of our room to maneuver, something we already know from visiting the zoo. As I suggested earlier, we even understand identities as cages or prisons that restrict us. It is also possible to be restricted by not having the right identity. Just recall how women often have been—and still are—restricted in different ways, for example, when walking in certain neighborhoods after dark. The limits appear to be transparent, but they stop you, because of the metal they are made of—just like cage.

The mirror, on the other hand, requires light to reflect. There is no point in looking at yourself in the mirror if you are in a dark room. Yet, the cage isn't dark, and in another way, it is, as it evokes the sense of being locked up. Or as some would say, we live in dark times due to growing nationalism, racism, sexism, etc. Furthermore, even if there is light, does this mean that the mirror reflects reality? Which is real or more real: inside or outside? Can we even make this distinction without being reductive?

We could also take up Hein's challenge from his work *Please*: to focus, search, and be aware. Are there really any limitations or borders other than the ones we create? Think of how nationality functions as an exclusive password. Is life just one big Russian matryoshka doll where we only discover one cage within another, detaching ourselves from one identity only to apply or establish another? In short: Do

we imprison ourselves, or is it done to us?

The work *You* from 2011 is a hole in the gallery wall through which the viewer sees a reflection of his or her own eye. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre has a lovely paragraph where Pierre looks through a keyhole into the girls' locker room. Suddenly, Pierre hears a noise and becomes conscious of himself. During his intensive gazing, he loses himself, until a sound awakens him, or as Sartre would put it, the sound deprives Pierre of the freedom of simply being-for-himself. Pierre goes from being a subject who watches girls as objects, to being an object himself.

This awakening confronts Pierre with the fact that he will have to decide how he wants to live. He realizes that his identity isn't a given when he realizes that someone else sees him as an object. Accordingly, he becomes aware of how each one of us bears responsibility for what we do, that is, in deciding how to move forward through life. There can only be ethics if there is a problem. The problem that Hein addresses is similar to our relationship with our self.

When Pierre is confronted with the noise (or it could be thought of as another person's gaze) he becomes conscious. Yet, Sartre operates not only with a consciousness of consciousness, as when Pierre becomes conscious of himself, but also with a consciousness of being embarrassed. The point is that by being conscious of his embarrassment, Pierre is no longer embarrassed; he lets go of his attachment to this feeling.

What happens if we eliminate the other's gaze focused on us? That's when I look at my own eye looking back at me. Do I then become conscious of myself as a conscious being

who is watching by myself? Like the mirror in the work *Cage and Mirror*, my eye needs light to see but can I really see my own eye while ,it' sees me? Does the intensity of seeing alternate between my eye and my reflected eye, as if I were first the subject, then the object, then the subject...? Is the process of becoming conscious a never-ending story? Or, could I even wonder whether my reflected eye really is as real as my own eye, which is located in my skull?

This line of questioning can then be extended. Are you aware of your eyes when you see, your ears when you hear, your nose when you smell, or your body when you touch? The tactile element is easy to neglect; after all, you are always in touch with something other than yourself: standing on the floor, sitting on a rock, lying in your bed, hanging from a tree branch, etc. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir writes, "To exist is to *make oneself* a lack of being; it is to cast oneself into the world."<sup>8</sup> In other words, we can only exist in engagement with and commitment to the world, a relationship that requires, according to de Beauvoir, that we are all free to do so. "To will oneself free is also to will others free." All of us will have to face our own actions as well as face ourselves while we act. The way we live demonstrates how we feel and think. By looking at the reflection of my own eye, I am confronted with my own freedom and the freedom of others. For example, are you free to become conscious of your own consciousness and to gaze at your eye gazing back at you while you contemplate if that eye, your own eye, sees you as you see yourself or if your gaze is influenced by others like a shadow you can't get

8 S. Beauvoir (1948). *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Open Road.



rid of?

Hein is playing with us in an existential way, emphasizing that art and philosophy have nothing to do with ideological dogmatism. He doesn't tell us which cage we are in, only that we may have caught ourselves on a fish hook at the end of a line that we ourselves have cast. We restrict ourselves. He may make us wonder why we don't like what we see when we see ourselves looking at ourselves. Perhaps, as I believe, he presents us with the nothingness of being.

Why do so many choose to play themselves, taking on the role of this him or her, when they could become someone else?

The words that meet the viewer, which is you, when you enter the exhibition *Your Way* are expressed in good faith when they declare: I do yoga, I kiss, I search....

I am what I am becoming.

\* \* \*

Allow me to squeeze more existential juice out of Jeppe Hein's work. Although I don't think that he has ever read Kierkegaard, the two can be seen as following the same track.

In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes: "The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self isn't the relation but that the relation relates itself to its own self."<sup>9</sup> This is a sentence that requires re-reading.

9 S. Kierkegaard (1991): *Sygdommen til Døden*. Samlede værker bind 15. Gyldendals Bogklubber.

The self of the human being is a relation between the body and the mind (or soul, in Kierkegaard's idiom). It is a relationship that relates to itself, folds around itself. This shouldn't be read as narcissism or some kind of ego-trip; nothing would be further from Kierkegaard. Similarly, when Hein invites us to gaze at our own eye, he opens the space in-between our two eyeballs. Instead, Kierkegaard wishes to illustrate that your relationship with your self is a relationship with the relation there is between your body and your mind. Do you live from the neck up? Do you only notice your feet when you're tired? Furthermore, the relationship that Kierkegaard speaks about is your relation to what made and makes you. In a way, your self is placed in-between your particular life in the here and now and the continuous flow of life as such. You are constantly changed by both.

For Kierkegaard, this double relationship requires a reflection on God's role, a fixed point. However, for people without any religious faith, it would require a reflection on your relationship with your own past: where you were born, your gender, skin color, and the rest of the privileges or disadvantages that shape you. In addition, you would have to reflect on your own intimate past, acknowledging the decisions you made, why you made them, consider what could have happened if you had chosen differently, etc.

With this rough outline, it is obvious that it was life that Kierkegaard took seriously and not himself. It matters to him who you are now and who you are in the midst of becoming. He encourages you to learn from the past, not to get stuck in it. He dwells in the present moment but knows

that each present moment is an actualized past leading toward the future to come. Being conscious of your place in-between a past not yet over and future still not here characterizes your relationship with the present moment.

Whether or not a god is part of the equation, you will always be part of something greater. Even if we feel uncomfortable with a god, or simply don't believe in the existence of another world, Kierkegaard is still relevant. Even without a god, you can still be humble about being alive today, being here in this world, right here and now, experiencing the intensity. You can bear witness to something greater than yourself, as when you pass on life to future generations.

The sickness that Kierkegaard refers to, the one that follows you unto death, is one of guilt. Guilt can be seen as bad faith due to selling out your potential to become whatever in order to fit a prestigious ideal. This bad faith matures as your time remaining in life decreases. No one knows his or her way in life before he or she starts walking. In a similar way, Hein has clearly been more focused on the way to move through life, having had exhibitions with titles such as *This Way* and *Your Way*. The shared theme in these exhibitions is questioning how we become worthy of what is happening to us. How can we face life with dignity?

The process of guilt, spanning from life to death, is related to despair. Kierkegaard shares elements from Buddhism and its ideas related to letting go. For example, the kind of despair that people suffer from due to the loss of titles, prestige, status, or even a girlfriend, are shallow in Kierkegaard's eyes. Career is, after all, nothing but an

amusing diversion from what really matters—love.

This can be exemplified by re-telling Jeppe Hein's story of burnout, which was caused by his ego-drive to be loved while not knowing that love only appears if one is really free—free of any kind of attachment and free to succeed in co-commitment with everyone else. For some, Kierkegaard can appear quite harsh toward those who are attached to their titles and feel important in society. He doesn't feel pity. Rather, those who suffer from loss of status are to him ridiculous. What causes the despair in those pitiful lives is that once they lose their titles, they are left with themselves, and most people, tend to fear themselves. They are afraid of asking themselves deep and fundamental question about why they wish what they wish, do what they do, etc. Instead, it is easier to have a career, polish a profile on Twitter, or Google your name so many times that even Justin Bieber will envy you in the yearly statistics.

You can also, says Kierkegaard, feel despair due to your own weakness. Today we would call this victimhood, as when some people find relief in seeing themselves as victims of circumstance. This approach lacks in humility toward the world, be it toward life in general or a god. It is pathetic, in other words. What Kierkegaard gains by forcing his reader to relate to himself or herself isn't only guiding them to reflect on how mind and body cohere but also on how they relate to a god or life; in this way, he makes freedom something infinite that is related to love. The claim is, of course, that any god is love, just as it was love that brought us and will secure our future existence. The moral of the story, based on this claim, is this: only those who are capable of loving can

think and thereby justify their decisions in life, if not for the love of a god, then for the love of thinking or for the love of something much greater than themselves. I am part of this world; we are all in it together.

Kierkegaard is a poetic philosopher. He knew that where reason ends, faith and poetry begin. For those who don't have much faith in a god, you can still use your imagination to envision alternative worlds. The point is that we need to lose ourselves—get rid of our ego—and have the courage to move beyond our fixed faculties of reason or knowledge in order to take a step into the unknown and entrust ourselves to life—to go where life takes us.

Philosophy is defined as wondering, questioning, and using the imagination, but it is also despair, according to the Danish existentialist. The more intense your life situation, the more despair. A lived experience is felt through intensity. In other words, the more despair, the more you are confronted with yourself, that is, not only your relationship with yourself, i.e., your past, present, and future self, but also your relationship with everything that formed and forms you.

Another way of addressing this despair is to see it as an ongoing relationship between what is possible and what is necessary. If there is only one possibility, there is no reality. This emphasizes that what is real is always a multiplicity. The world isn't a given. There is no master plan for us to follow. Furthermore, when everything is necessary, then there is no hope. Yet, to know what is possible and what is necessary requires an exploration of our selves, our life situation, as well as our responsibility towards others. It

is in this gap that I place Hein's artistic project. He presents us with alternative ways of relating to life and art: more mindful ways that emphasize the joy of being alive.

To be a sinner, therefore, has for Kierkegaard nothing to do with lack of knowledge or weakness but rather with a chosen position. We have the thoughts and feelings we deserve. I sin, for example, when I choose not to follow God or not to acknowledge that I am part of something greater than myself. For Kierkegaard, this is something individual. You can only have a personal relationship with God; it's not a group seminar that tends to end in groupthink. Nevertheless, you will always have to live with the rest of us. Again, this is a theme in Hein's work. He uses his own transformation and insight that have emerged from doing yoga and meditation, and he wishes to share his experience. How can he do so without moralizing? It is difficult to pinpoint when something becomes too much. Here, the viewers are probably better at evaluating their own experience after trying to interact openly, with love and kisses, as the artist suggests. Then see what happens. Does it add intensity to your life?

\* \* \*

Kierkegaard urges us to have a project in life that transcends our own ego. The greatest obstacle for living a life worth living today is not our shallowness but rather our narcissism—an outspoken egoism that is well fed by a neoliberal ideology and the achievements society it has produced.

For Kierkegaard, passion was a criterion for truth. He famously said that in subjectivity is truth. This isn't an

example of selfishness or egoism. Rather, subjectivity is created through our relationship with our own relation between our mind and body as well as with our past and potential future, and it is exactly here that I think that modern readers may ask whether *their* passion really is their passion. Are certain social identities seducing you? Why do you desire what you desire? Why do so many people desire pitiful objectives like titles, status, and power when all they provide is stress, depression, and existential crises?

Thus, Kierkegaard's passion is a passion for life—not for Facebook, Netflix, obsessive training, or whatever else. Simply life as such: that which makes you breathe and that which can take your breath away. It is through our exploration of life—what it is and what it can gradually mature into—that we become capable of justifying our decision-making and knowing which way is the right one for you and me, respectively.

*Your Way* doesn't refer to moralism nor has it anything to do with egoism. Your way is not necessarily my way. Your way, to be more precise, only refers to people who create their own path. For such people, my way is *solely* suited to each one of them. My way, therefore, is a notion that faces you with the fact that you are responsible for your life and what it is that you want to achieve with it. Finding your way involves the creative investigation of what it means to be a human being. It can provoke you. It can or at least tries to make you re-examine how you perceive, interact, and construct the world you live in—the world that you are responsible for passing on to future generations.

In 1974, Abramović performed the work *Rhythm*

*O*—a six-hour long performance in which she stood still while the viewers were invited to do whatever they wished. On the table in front of her were placed 72 objects: honey, bread, grapes, a rose, a feather, a knife, a scalpel, a pistol... The performance ended when a rather battered Abramović had the pistol pointed at her temple, and other participants intervened. The purpose, she said, was to find out how far the public would go.

How do we perceive what is happening? In what way are we accountable for our actions? How do we become worthy of what is happening?

Jeppé Hein too is a performer who intervenes. He not as much wants to find out how far the public would go; rather debate whether it has gone too far. Such argumentation is too far removed from life, as if too many of us were already beyond help. Therefore, his work tends to make you turn toward yourself and reflect on your relationship with life. Kindly he makes you wonder: Does it make sense to breathe consciously? Yes, he believes it does. Therefore, he turns you around yourself while he tries to get rid of the middleman, whether we call the middleman ideals, norms, or all the objectives that bestow status and prestige in today's achievement-oriented society.

Hein isn't Abramović; rather, he is the one who decides to intervene when things go too far. He takes his own experience as departure. „I burned out,“ he says. He was lost. Now he asks: „Are you? Do you know your way? Is it this way? My way?“

\* \* \*



Imagine: you are standing in front of the Château La Coste. Now, like the woman, you feel alienated, a little bit lost. While standing there, with this text in your hand, you realize how unfamiliar you are with being familiar with yourself. It feels like someone is holding a gun to your temple. You raise your hand, only to meet your other hand. “Am I doing this to myself?”, you ask. Then you turn around and are immediately confronted by the words: Please, be aware, breathe ... You move on—this is your way.



Illustration: Jeppe Hein, 2017  
[www.jeppehein.net](http://www.jeppehein.net)