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Scholarship, Art, Practice, and the Universal We

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Art, scholarship, and practice are inseparable: together, they illuminate and enact human experience. Engaging with the world, they transform observation into understanding, and knowledge into action, revealing the interconnectedness of society, nature, and the cosmos.

One cannot separate the scholar, the artist, and the creative practitioner. In the broader field of the humanities, human experience is the central concern—the focal point. It is the act of experiencing the world that provokes both the creative impulse and the intellectual pursuit of knowledge. This demands ongoing engagement with society, with its developments and its transformations. Just as the social sciences must remain rooted in their direct engagement with the phenomena they seek to understand, so too must the creative process. Despite claims to the contrary, imagination does not spring from nowhere—it draws from the observable universe, interacting with and expressing itself through social acts such as language, art, and other cultural forms.

For me, lived experience—what Henri Lefebvre called "the dialectics of the lived, perceived, and conceived"—is a vital point of departure. It guides my attempts to examine the world through diverse vantage points and approaches: scholarly, literary, artistic, and collaborative. These modes are deeply intertwined, even if we must speak of them separately for methodological clarity. Each enriches the others, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the human condition.

From this inseparability of human experience and its expression, I draw on Antonio Gramsci's concept of *praxis*, which insists on the active participation of the observer within the movement of history itself. Without such participation, one risks being trapped in a past that is no longer relevant. Gramsci writes:

> In reality one can foresee only the struggle and not its concrete episodes; these must be the result of opposing forces in continuous movement, never reducible to fixed quantities, because in them quantity is always becoming quality. Really one "foresees" to the extent to which one acts, to which one makes a voluntary effort and so contributes concretely to creating the "foreseen" result.

In other words, predictions are grounded in specific historical moments, not in history's continuous unfolding. The only way to truly comprehend history is through active engagement—through practice, through the effort to shape what lies ahead.

This echoes what we see in quantum physics: a physical event unfolds across infinite potential trajectories, multiple histories. An observation—an intervention—collapses these possibilities into a specific state. Here too, the act of observing becomes part of the event. Observation is not passive; it is an action entangled with the outcome.

This dynamic interplay is what animates both my literary and scholarly work. Each strives to engage the reader as co-creator, as co-thinker, from different angles. Together, they form a triangular equation where practice, creativity, and scholarship merge into a multidimensional lens through which to observe the contemporary world—with all its injustices, inequalities, and complexities. Scholarship offers knowledge and understanding; art brings reflection, reinterpretation, emotions and alternative visions; practice situates both within the ongoing dialectic of societal transformation.

Literature, as a multilayered exploration of social experience, and practice, as an organic, internal participation in the human condition, together with scholarship, which seeks the hidden causes and connections, constitute a necessary composite. Not to gaze at "others" through a preset, preconstructed window, but to critically expose and question the very process of othering—a process so central to the US-Eurocentric worldview, rooted in a modernity often conceived as an exclusively European phenomenon. As thinkers like Octavio Paz and Enrique Dussel have argued, this modernity depends on the construction of the "peripheral" Other.

In critiquing the "us" and "them" dichotomy, I invoke a *universal we*—one that includes not only humans but animals, rocks, stars, inanimate matter, and the subtle interdependencies that comprise the cosmos. This is a truly universal perspective that, for me, was influenced and shaped by science—cosmology, evolutionary biology, quantum physics. These fields have taught me humility and perseverance as I no longer seek a singular "meaning" for my own, or human, existence, but rather their universal usefulness: how, in this brief life, currently averaging 73 years, I might contribute usefully within the immense continuity that is the universe.

This poetic approach reveals how art, with its creative potency, can reposition the rigid and categorical structures of the humanities within the vast spectrum of human and cosmic experience. It allows for a multiplicity of "we"—a concept akin to Roland Barthes' notion of the plural text, in which

> the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable.

This is the plurality that art is able to inject into scholarship—challenging its inclination to categorize and isolate, and reconnecting it with the holistic context of existence: a continuum where everything is related to everything else, as Joseph Jacotot correctly and insightfully argued. Life is a field of relations and contexts. History, as the Megadeth song puts it, is a "train of consequences"—and "there ain't no turning back." Every present moment is bound to everything that came before it; if it weren't, it would be something else entirely. The present is the inevitable outcome of the past in its entirety. All pasts are connected, intersecting with other people's pasts, which in turn intersect

with others', and so on, endlessly. The same holds true for social, economic, and political events—they are threads in a vast web of personal and collective histories, each one unfolding into and out of another. Human phenomena cannot be fully understood outside this intricate field of interconnection. A beautifully simple illustration of this now-central idea in the humanities appears in a three-minute sequence from *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, where a seemingly random car accident—one that radically alters a character's life—unfolds from a chain of trivial, unrelated events that align just so. All phenomena emerge from such infinite intersections, occurring at every level: personal, social, political, and beyond.

An inauspicious day from the get-go

Some damn thing made her mom start talking to her about her fiancé yet again. "He's just not cast from the same clay we are," she said, "and I don't think he's really got it in him to make it a home." And as always happens at such times, the young woman shouted and swore, then she hurtled—like a metal water tank hoisted half-way up towards the roof slipping its trusses to crash back down—out of the house.
In the moment between her opening the front door and slamming it behind her, a tank passed; the sound of its tracks the crushing of little children's bones, the smell of its exhaust charred corpses. As she crossed over to the opposite sidewalk a sniper behind her shot a young man at the end of the street, of whom nothing had appeared in the machine gun's sights except the hair on the back of his head.
Before she raised her hand to her friend's doorbell a bulldozer had extended its metal claw towards the walls of the next-door building, so that it crumbled into pieces on the ground.
Under the rubble a doll with disheveled hair and dusty clothes was playing some music out of her belly, next to her a notebook in which the boy had drawn what he imagined of a bulldozer destroying a house that he imagined as his own.
The boy sits silent while the woman at his side (his mother) hits herself on the head, his father having preceded him to prison. The boy will grow up one day and will love a girl who has grown up also, and then he will be betrothed to her.
The boy who got engaged to the girl—after they grew up, and he got out of prison—had been saying goodbye to her at the end of the street, and stayed there watching her walk away until she entered her house. Then he slowly walked along the street from one end to the other, passing in front of the sniper, who eventually took the decision to put a bullet in the back of the boy's head, after the tank had gone down the street, and he'd heard the sound of a door slamming and a girl had dashed by from one sidewalk to the other, all of which he took to be evil omens, and were.

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Translated from the Arabic by Alice Guthrie

"My poetry has always been influenced by other artistic media, including contemporary dance, music, and audiovisuals. 'An inauspicious day from the get-go' is a poem with direct roots in cinema. It is affected by the simple, striking, abrupt, and contradictory visual elements in the films of two avant-garde Palestinian directors: Hany Abu-Assad's Rana's Wedding and Elia Suleiman's Divine Intervention and The Time that Remains. Similar to these films, the poem explores the indifferent, banal, and haphazard genocidal violence inflicted by, and inherent in, settler colonialism; so that regular, daily acts of the colonized, like talking on a phone, or looking out a window, become extremely dangerous actions. Through the 'colonial encounter,' such simple acts transform into areas within which the colonized struggle to maintain their continuity,

existence, and life, as contrasted with the colonizer's core endeavor[s] of disruption, annihilation, death. This poem touches on these contrasts of ordinary, day-to-day living, examining how colonialism obliterates them to a point of no return."

From this plural vantage point, I turn to literary works such as Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Story of a City. A Childhood in Amman*, to study and reflect on the transformations of my hometown, Amman. Similarly, I engage with Yann Tiersen's album *Le Phare* as an aural reimagining of place—interpreting Brittany through sound and music. This helps me explore the layered relationships between urban change, nature, and society.

Le Phare offers another insight: by performing all the instruments and making all the sounds himself, Tiersen reveals the potential for solitary, self-directed creative journeys. Like art, research, too, can be solitary, especially in its production phase, and often involves the composition and recomposition of disparate elements into a coherent, and ideally harmonious, whole. It should generate new knowledge—new ways of seeing, understanding, and being. In this sense, scholarship depends on creativity, and has much to learn from art.

Finally, from a methodological standpoint, art deserves a more central place in the humanities because it always exists in context—in social and cultural space. It is published, exhibited, performed; it is showcased for audiences; demands public interaction, interpretation, and dialogue beyond the narrow and closed sphere of its creators. This stands in contrast with much of academia, where work is often cloistered behind the paywalls of specialized journals and academic books, buried in specialized jargon, inaccessible to broader audiences.

Art transforms, and it invites transformation. Quietly, deeply, over time, it opens conversations—with readers, listeners, viewers—and activates the counter-potential of creative observation and engagement within society. These are precisely the dimensions that scholarship in the humanities must embrace if it is to evolve. In doing so, it can help transform the observer, the observed, and the process itself—moving us toward a truly *international*, interconnected understanding of existence that is expressed in *relations* of universal continuity and interconnectedness. Here, the "universal we" becomes not only more evident, but more organic, more urgent, and more necessary.