

All Talk, No Action

Fredric Gunve

What is the difference between practicing and preaching, and what does it have to do with themes?

– My name is Fredric Gunve and I work as an artist. I've had several exhibitions, performances, situation based happenings, installations, teaching projects, texts, and I have often been asked:

– What themes do you work with?

And I have often answered.

The answers have rarely been consistent or particularly thematical but I have tried to fit them into the theme of the day, my theme of the day.

I thought about opening up this "theme about themes" by being critical. By arguing that most theme-based exhibitions and artists working with themes, are insecure in terms of their own work. I come from a romantic idea of how I would like to look at my own art, of how I wish it would always derive from my own passion, rather than a certain theme. That it should build a new person and a new world. That it should show a method of explanations and create a machinery that itself creates the contemporary and the future. I thought: why do they force themes on us? Always this silly packaging. As if the world would be so simple that if you just put a fancy title on it, in English preferably, then everything will be ok. That themes would force the artist and the art itself to adapt to the endless discussion about discourse.

That is how I thought about opening up, but I soon realized my mistake. That none of my reasoning made sense, that I don't know who "they" are, if "them" is not possibly myself?

All talk, no action

The theme is the theme, the theme is art.

A presentation of my way of thinking as an artist at www.torsgatan3.com, a text written in the fall of 2005:

"I once stated that I am an scientist looking for the cure against hopelessness. And that is what I look for. Art has the potential to be so much and it has the potential to really make a difference. By choosing this profession you have to possibility to look around the corner, but also the possibility to develop and lay out paths for the future. It is about hope and passion."

Theme: cures, healing, helping.

Question:

How do you relate to themes?

– I see themes as the strength of art. It keeps the debate together and provides us with a stable framework. Without themes I believe that the art scene in Sweden would dissolve and loose its meeting-points. Themes are keeping the conception of art together. Since there are so many ways of producing contemporary art, it would simply dissolve unless a theme would keep it together. Maybe art does need mild force, simple rules to make it possible. To be forced to explore other interests and opinions, even the ones yourself find uninteresting. By applying a theme, artists, curators and other participants will come together and find new ways of developing.

Excerpt from my application of a teachers position, 2005:

"In my work as an artist I have found it particularly productive to work in the interdisciplinary field between education, entertainment and experience. The future is something that really engages me and I believe in working with a positive spirit with information and education. One example of my way of working with the future is through my studies of sci-fi literature and my thoughts on different future scenarios, both utopias and dystopias."

“My artistic methods move over vast areas, but always with the gathering of information as the core. One example would be cooking in a social context, installations where I have myself been participating as an informant to the different parts of the artwork, workshops, lectures and publicized writings. My exhibitions build upon an idea of a place where everybody has a role and a task. Despite this, I don't see myself as an artist in the way Bourriaud would in his theory of relational aesthetics, but rather by believing equally as much in the importance of the object and the aesthetic and its relation to us humans. In the pelargonium works, the pelargonium are as much of a participant as the visitors of the exhibition are, and the hors d'oeuvre are operators just because they are beautiful, even if they are later eaten by the visitors.”

Theme: Main theme: get the job. Other themes: education, future, ways of communicating.

Themes are what keeps together a disparate group of events, actions, objects, the notion that is defined as art.

By separating art from all rules, genres and materials it takes something else to keep art together and that is themes. Placed within a theme anything can become art but only if it is supported by other works of art within the same theme. In that way, you can say that *the art of today is the theme*, and outside of its theme the art stops being art. Art is no longer safe on its own; it is always in interaction with other art. This separates contemporary art from other art practices, such as music, which is always relating to sound, or literature that relates to the written word. Music is music when it can be listened to, and literature is literature when it can be read. Contemporary art however, has separated itself from fixed techniques and materials. This complete freedom has created many new platforms but also many new problems. The problems show up when the theme brings out inhibitions and when the theme stands in the way for something new and interesting to develop. These problems apply to the entire profession and the question of what art is.

Excerpt from a grant application 2004:

“In my art I work with the communication between the spectator and the artist, and between the spectators themselves, and how we all exchange knowledge. I build scenarios where objects and people share the same space, where aesthetics and the applying of aesthetics to humans become a tool in the strive to reach the unspoken, the part of communication that cannot be spoken or written down.”

“...push my art into becoming a functional tool, where it becomes a way of living as well as way of taking action. // I am in touch with SKB (Swedish Nuclear Fuel) to see if there is any connection between us in regards of using communication, this coming from the idea of writing a sign that will last one hundred thousand years.”

“Earlier, I have experimented in collaboration with people without being able to use my native tongue. In Russia I cooked a meal together with a woman, we could make food but we didn't speak the same language. We communicated through actions and body language. This work led me into thinking about communication beyond language and culture. How would an artistic language work if it came to communicating with a non-human civilization, or the transfer of information during an extended period of time? How would we communicate with the future? How would we communicate with aliens?”

Theme: Communication, interaction.

What makes the artist profession possible? Is it more of a tradition than an actual purpose?

Having determined that themes are what is keeping art together and maybe even constitutes art itself, then what is the artist? Is being an artist even a profession in itself, or should we consider it an *additional* profession, on top of another? A sort of parasite profession, or maybe to make it sound a little nicer; a profession in symbiosis with another profession such as a sociologist who makes art, a politician who makes art, a designer who makes art.

This theme about themes is about the artist role, asking: how would we like to look at the artistic profession? Should the artist be a subjective, analytic machinery who filter themes and passes them along nicely packaged, ready to be consumed? Is the artist the middle hand, the wholesaler between the theme and the public who then gives the final word on the analysis? If that is the case, is the artist even needed? If

contemporary economical reasoning applies to contemporary art, meaning it would simply be like any other trading of information, then the artist would not be needed anymore. Taking the artist out of the game would purify the handling of information.

Noise reduction by artist reduction.

If the artist is more than just an analytic machinery chewing through given themes, then does theme really matter?

Excerpt from travel grant application, 2004:

“Right now I am working with the theme of how to handle ones fears. The fear of the evil, and the uncontrollably evil. Many of my works and exhibitions breathe a hint of “super niceness”. My graduation work at Valand Art Academy was sort of a “central station for niceness”, but could also be viewed as a “human trap”. I have also produced works that includes a survival backpack, as well as plants as life carriers.

“In my work, H.P Lovecraft has become a returning object of study. Since I was studying literature before I studied art, I always felt it was very natural to use fiction as a resource. In my theories regarding fear it has struck me how much the concept of fear has changed in the US and Europe. During the cold war the fear of the nuclear bomb was a type of fear that we handled collectively. In recent years, there has surfaced yet another war-related fear, a private one this time, -the fear of terror. Terror strikes when we least expect it, in our homes, at our workplace or at the theater. In other words, fear has become a much more private business, as opposed to a collective one such as the fear of the nuclear bomb. I see parallels between the fear of terror and early H.P Lovecraft stories.”

“This trip would therefore become a connection between early twentieth century gothic aesthetics and today’s contemporary art, through the literature of H P Lovecraft. In what ways has gothic, romantic literature (and art) influenced our times on an artistic, private and general level?”

Theme: Fear and terror.

“The artist is who questions it all”

The artist has the task of putting together a variety of statements and phenomena, but outside and beyond the demand for truth or reality. The artist profession is the profession that invents possibilities and visions of what “*could be*”. The artist becomes the gatherer. The artist becomes the theme-worker.

Translated to English by Ylva Mazetti