

Unforeseen, unforeseeable: what do artists do that makes their work endure? If artists have the capacity to make work that defies time, it is because instead of trying to force-fit a predetermined idea of the future, they have learned to live productively with ambiguity, to see it as a rich source of discovery and exploration. Instead of trying to reduce complexity, they mine it, undaunted by contradictions and paradoxes. Working in the interstices of uncertainty is how they forge their identity, making future works and worlds that they can't see before they get there – and which they may only dimly understand on arrival. They are propelled by a strong sense of agency, knowing that their work won't exist if they don't make it.....

Generalizations about art always fail at some point because there are no rules that always work and no rules that are never broken. It is personal, human and unique. Nevertheless, artists do have routines, ways of sensing and making sense. But if experiments and scenarios offer ways of working into the unknown, artists illustrate ways of being that more tactical approaches to life miss. We may not all be artists, but we can learn from their habits.

NOTICE

Ibsen was a prodigious noticer: remembering guests who had shared his hotel years before, noting their reading habits, wondering whether a young man's light appetite might indicate disease, worrying about another guest's expensive habits. Nothing, it seems, was too small for his attention, not clothes, food, weather or syntax: he noted that the way people spoke changed as the day wore on, that men and women end sentences differently. His acute social awareness scanned the horizon for silent flares of anger or injury..... To write, Ibsen said, was to see. In this, Ibsen is like most artists: febrile, alert, receptive, with a mind like a streets weeper. The literary historian James Shapiro says this is true of Shakespeare: how acute his observation, how aware of the vast importance of trifles. Many artists are super-sensors, their humility manifest in their alertness to the small and unimportant. Colm Tóibín writes of Proust that he is always 'noticing, registering, sifting evidence and studying what lay on the surface, seeing what people wished to reveal of themselves when they appeared in the social world.....'

Noticing for artists is a habit of mind. The visual artist Katie Paterson says that she is always tuning in to something – but without obvious intent. 'Nature, always. Telescopes. Observatories. Zen temples. Libraries. Swimming pools. Water. Universities. Iceland. Japan,' Paterson laughs, recognising that the list could go on. Much of what Paterson tunes into is sensual; physical texture, smell, light and sound are, for her, as full of meaning as data and news. *Hollow*, a sculpture completed in 2016, brings together over 10,000 tree species from the oldest tree in the world to the youngest – standing inside of it is to experience the feel and smell of time. Paterson's work starts with detail. 'It needs', she says, 'to be accurate to be imagined.' That requires intense attention – not being too busy to notice, not walking down the street staring at a phone.

Similarly, when he isn't in the midst of production, the filmmaker Mike Leigh needs to give his mind free range: 'Every time we finish a film, the gang always says: where's the next one? They want to do it! But it's so important to have time to do nothing. I don't mean nothing of course, that's just what it looks like. I read all the

time. I look at pictures. I like being alone. You need time alone just to sense: what's going on, where are we right now? Nothing happening is something happening.' Margaret Atwood describes a similar process behind the genesis of *The Handmaid's Tale*: a steady collecting of clippings, each real, all gradually coalescing into a picture of rigidly enforced misogyny that wasn't a figment of the future but obvious to her around the world, once she started to notice.

These descriptions are strangely reminiscent of Eleanor Maguire talking about the brains of her London cab drivers: individuals stocking their minds and memories with rich, random observations, the raw ingredients for later compositions. But there is little didactic about this process; it seems to be constant, diffused and undirected – scanning, noting, collecting. Heads up, eyes, ears, minds open. This includes reading that, at its deepest level, is experienced as life itself. Virginia Woolf described reading as 'absorbing at every pore' and her mind is saturated with it; it is, she writes, an addiction – but not an opiate. Almost the opposite, in fact.....

This mind wandering is without intention or plan. But, consciously or unconsciously, artists are incapable of not doing it. It is why Dickens prowled city streets at night, Ibsen took long daily walks and Virginia Woolf set out across London. They all sought to absorb the minute details that others might ignore or overlook but that artists collect. Where there is intention, it is inchoate: there is, as yet, no plan. Instead, this way of being is drawn to the unfamiliar, anomalous, ambiguous. This is not a quest for confirmation or certainty. A form of imaginative immersion, its purpose is undefined – and much that enters this collection of raw material may never emerge.....

At the age of ninety-three, the theatre director Peter Brook recalled an experience that has stayed with him since he was a young man, travelling in Afghanistan: 'I saw a man sitting in front of a prison. The situation he was in will never leave me. He was just sitting and looking at the prison. He offered to share some of his food with me but I didn't have the courage to take it so I said no. Now it seems a shame, not sharing. At the time I didn't know why he said that or who he was. I just had endless questions . . .' The experience stayed with Brook, latent for over fifty years, available until needed. If needed. For anyone craving certainty or wedded to plans, this way of living is excruciating. There are no measurable goals, no reassuring benchmarks of progress. This way of life is not for the Pavlovian dog but for the independent cat: attentive and meandering. Experienced artists learn over time to trust that something of value will emerge; their apprenticeship entails not just the acquisition of skills but of patience.....

Kavanagh also drew a telling distinction between two opposites: the provincial and the parochial artist. The provincial, he argued, 'Has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say on any subject.' So the provincial craves patterns, cares about fashion, longs to be on point. His mind is so full of preconceptions, editing and ranking as he goes that it is almost closed. He longs for predictions, signposts and pathways, not daring to explore alone. For Kavanagh, the provincial's is not the mind of an artist, because it is crammed with prescribed agendas. The parochial mind, however, digs deep and keeps digging, confident that the parish is universal.

SIMMER

The great American documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman believes in daydreaming, which he described as paying ‘as much attention to peripheral thoughts at the edge of my mind as to any formally logical approaches to the material. My associations are often as valuable as my attempts at deductive logic.’ Because explanation is not their game, ambiguity is productive for artists – though it takes courage and stamina to endure it. Unlike expedient work, imagination doesn’t move directly from observation to action but from noticing to gestation. What do particular images, stories, observations mean? What are they saying? Mulling over the accumulated impressions and sensations internalises memories, turns them into source material, available for interpretation.....

Of all these accumulated sensations, which ones matter? Artists must decide what to work on. The choice of subject comes with no guarantees but must override all other options. Many say that, while they accumulate a plethora of thoughts and impressions, only a few demand attention – but how and why isn’t immediately obvious. After his encounter near the prison in Afghanistan, Peter Brook spent half a century doing other work;The memory of the prisoner didn’t leave him, he said, it just wouldn’t come to the boil. Artists use any number of words to describe the process between collection and making: gestation, filtering, percolating, simmering, mulling, distilling, digesting, waiting. No one I’ve ever talked to or worked with can explain how or why clarity emerges; they simply trust that it will.

In practical terms, this means that artists wait for meaning to emerge. ‘Be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart,’ Rilke wrote, advising a young poet, **‘and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue . . . Live the questions for now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer . . . this is what you must work on however you can and not waste too much time and too much energy on clarifying your attitude to other people.’**

There’s an echo here of the CERN scientists who glean over time where physics might be going next. But where they collect and review data, artists use themselves and their lives as the colliders – the place where collisions occur, where signals can be traced and interpreted. What propels the work are questions that reverberate incessantly: **what do these images, words, signals mean to me? Why won’t this idea leave me alone?** With no specific end in mind, the answers are undetermined and unpredictable. For most artists, the decision of what to work on remains unconscious and personal. ‘I know the premise will come,’ Mike Leigh told me. ‘It’ll come from my own preoccupations..... eventually!..... Ackroyd explains: ‘I’ve never had any grand plan, I just wanted to see those outliers – this little group of islands sitting off the edge of Europe that sits on the end of Asia and then you’ve got 3,000 miles of ocean before you come to America. So it really is the edge of everything. I want to try to squeeze the essence out of it.’ Observations, details, themes, experience coalesce into a starting point that uses, but is not, the artist’s life.....

This period of gestation defies planning and forecasting because its sole function is to sift through observation and experiences in search of new meaning. Waiting for that

to emerge isn't for the fainthearted. Looking and feeling unproductive, this period of time demands self-reliance, optimism and the courage to wait. That makes the working life of an artist unpredictable and precarious. But the capacity to tolerate uncertainty equips artists (and might equip us) better to function in a world that is unpredictable and precarious too, as to be an artist also requires finding the impetus to keep moving. The way to understand all those observations is to make something of them. For the work to take on a life of its own, the ideas and experiences that give rise to it have to move from the artist's mind to the canvas, the etching plate, the score, the workshop or the page.

STATE

Artists start without waiting to be asked. They have to begin. Where experimenters may carefully calculate need, passion and resources, artists supply all three themselves. The need and passion are internally generated. The resources are time and ideas, but time is not infinite. So choosing one subject means abandoning the rest, with no evidence to guarantee that the choice is right. The only way to find out is to start. Almost every artist describes their way of working as a curious combination of invention, which is conscious, and discovery, which is not. This process of unfolding can be seen when the printmaker Norman Ackroyd produces the first state of a new aquatint. What is, for many artists, invisible work is made visible in the documentary series: *What Do Artists Do All Day?*

..... So it takes stamina. America's great documentary maker Frederick Wiseman acknowledges that there is always anxiety 'that it's not going to work, a fear of failure. But that anxiety is a motor to get it done.' Tracey Emin talks about being intimidated by canvases, her need sometimes to draw as a kind of warm-up to overcoming her trepidation. Some of Emin's paintings sit for years, she says, waiting to be finished or developed – or changed completely:”.....

Paterson's latest project, Future Library, is defined by uncertainty over time. In 2014, in the Nordmarka forest outside Oslo, she planted a thousand trees that will produce paper to print a book in 2114. Once a year, for a hundred years, authors will submit manuscripts commissioned for the book. These can be stories, poems, a novel, a sentence, but no one but the author can read them until, nearly a hundred years from now, the complete book is published. Even Paterson does not read them. The first author to take part was Margaret Atwood, in 2015 novelist David Mitchell, in 2016 the Icelandic poet Sjón, in 2017 the Turkish novelist Elif Shafak, in 2018 the South Korean novelist Han Kang. The idea came to Paterson, she said, when she found herself drawing tree rings that she associated with chapters in a book.....

Instead of denying ambiguity, artists illuminate and explore it. When they are successful, the work creates a context in which we dare to experience some of the complexity and ambiguity of our own lives. When Ibsen wrote, he used what his biographer, Michael Meyer, calls '**double-density dialogue**': a language at once ordinary but oozing ambivalence and subtext that gets under the skin of his audience. At the time, this language was entirely new: the idea that what characters said might not be true was revolutionary. It infuriated his critics, who insisted life wasn't like that, but his plays endured because it is. Ibsen understood that there is no freedom – not for him, not for us – without uncertainty.....

Much is a matter of trial and error – or, you could say, experiments. Because trial and error is how children learn, and because it often looks like play, this way of working and being is also frequently misinterpreted as infantile. No rules (unless self-generated), no hard targets, no concrete goals: it doesn't look like work as it's commonly understood. But artists are among the toughest and most tough-minded people I've ever worked with.....

FAIL

Artists are often poor judges of their own work, if only because what might be said to succeed in art depends not on the work alone, but how it lives and breathes in the world. In our data-obsessed age, pseudo-scientific attempts have been made to measure the success of art, largely according to how often works are read, viewed, performed or sold. This is nonsense, of course. Shakespeare was not the most popular of his contemporaries, and, judged by this heuristic, for 200 years *King Lear* would have been pronounced an abject failure, because it was regarded as too dark and difficult to perform; today it seems the most modern of Shakespeare's work. For nearly a hundred years, little serious attention was paid to the nineteenth-century poet John Clare; his working-class origins and prolonged periods of mental illness accorded poorly with Victorian ideals of poetry. Yet in the middle of the twentieth century, his voice, his story, even his lack of punctuation suddenly appeared modern. The times had risen to meet Clare. His work, as W. H. Auden wrote, had been 'modified in the guts of the living', just as today a whole new generation of readers and artists is rediscovering James Baldwin, an artist who, by the 1980s, felt himself to be overlooked and underrated..... Appreciating the complexity of the environment in which their art operates means that artists know that they can't hope to control the reception to their work, that they can neither predict nor force the future. The recognition that so much work fails is painful, but accepting it gives them freedom.

'A perfect poem is impossible,' Robert Graves wrote. 'Once it had been written, the world would end.' Better is the chance to change. The future isn't something to be nailed down, defined and programmed. The only way to influence it is to keep noticing. While an efficient mindset prizes predictability and continuity, an artist's passion for exploration develops the capacity for change.....Artists often change before they have to. Fans and followers frequently deplore these moments of evolution, when musicians adopt or abjure new technology, when painters change media, when writers shift style or genre. Ibsen was forever frustrating his champions by his furious refusal to be tied down by their definition of him. Picasso's shifts in style baffled critics. Fans of Schoenberg's gorgeous classicism were dismayed and disgusted by his adoption of the twelve-tone scale. Even James Joyce's staunchest supporters balked before diving into *Finnegan's Wake*. Many Miles Davis fans never forgave his electric years. It took decades before Bob Dylan's fans got used to the idea that change was the point, that the developing self was Dylan's subject. 'Ninety per cent of me has changed,' Tracey Emin says. 'I want to see new things. There's no point looking over your shoulder to see who's coming up behind you; you should just enjoy the run, be with it and do it in your own way.'

Minds digging deep can't predict or promise where they need to go next. They pursue no agenda, except perhaps the need to be free. 'If you stand outside any position,'

Patrick Kavanagh wrote, 'you aren't at its mercy.' That is the benefit of doubt. It is why authoritarian regimes fear artists and why their citizens look to artists to be truth-tellers: because they don't simplify but clarify..... Writing of Joyce and Chekhov, Virginia Woolf observed that their work leaves questions 'to sound on and on after the story is ended', flooding us 'with a view of infinite possibilities'. Drawing conclusions, Chekhov wrote, is up to the jury, not the artist. Art lasts not because it nails down human experience, but because it refuses to do so.

Mind wandering. Diffuse but intense attention. Travel without an agenda. Non-linear. Undetermined. Unplanned. Open to reflection, accident and discovery. Inefficient. Inconsistent. In all of this, artists live and think in ways that are opposite to the linear, cause-and-effect, rational assumptions and efficient goals that underpin much of modern life and institutions. Instead, artists respond to the complex system that is life with the complex system that is the human mind.....

Sense-making, the intuition for change and capacity to pursue it energetically is what markets applauded in Steve Jobs, a man who wasn't an artist but thought like one. That is what many organisational strategists yearn to emulate. The billions of dollars spent on digital transformation programmes start with the dream of turning hierarchical, bureaucratic, data-driven organisations into visionary insight machines. If only everyone could think and act like an artist.....

It's a tall order and not without its challenges. Few leaders are prepared to give their workforce the kind of freedom that artists seize for themselves. The prevailing efficiency ethos and an addiction to planning and measurement are too embedded, and the risk feels too great to do what Jos de Blok did with Dutch homecare nurses: let people think for themselves.....

When it comes to the future, what matters is to invigorate the search, not to determine the outcome. Many artists, and people who think like artists, are inimical to formal organisations and the feeling is frequently mutual, with managers fearing or scorning whatever can't be easily predicted, planned or managed. Allowing people at work to think like artists takes far more than colourful walls, toys, murals, beanbags and open offices. It requires quiet places where it's easy to think. Free time – away from the office, from meetings, from rules and standard operating procedures – is essential for mind wandering. Few great ideas are born at a desk. To have insights that are relevant to life requires having a life, one rich in experiences and the time to internalise them. That requires trust: that the difficulty, the not-knowing, the periods of confusion and frustration, will amount to something worth the effort and the risk.

Providing a productive environment for creative thinking is not the same as learning to think like an artist oneself. That's an individual choice: to make the effort to notice where we are, what's around us, what's missing, to take the time to reflect on what it could mean. The paradox implicit in autonomous vehicles or GPS pertains to us too: if we don't use our human capacity for creativity, mind wandering, discovery and invention, we lose it. We could be more adventurous – exploring what we don't know, investigating what makes us uncomfortable, thinking without bannisters. To be where we are sounds simple and it feels like an easy habit of mind to instil. But creating and retaining memories and developing the capacity to mull over them – the foundational activities of imaginative work – are diminished when we let technology

take the strain. Taking photographs results in poorer memory of what we've seen. Online research gives us information faster but it doesn't last as long. The more we multi-task, switching as frequently as every nineteen seconds between diverse sources of information and entertainment, the less capacity we develop to pay and hold attention. As scans reveal the physical changes this kind of activity imposes on our brains, the downside of neuroplasticity becomes visible as all the gestational work of artists slips from our grasp.

What we lose when we surrender so much of our time and attention to generic technology is not just the opportunity for personal experience, but the chance to create from it our own sense of the world, our place in it and what the future for both might be. **The more time we spend visiting places that others have described, the more we follow the paths others have made, reading what we're told, seeing what the algorithm recommends, listening to what crowd-sources admire and eating what's already been photographed, tasted, marketed and measured, the less capacity we have to see what we didn't expect, to hear what we weren't told about or to ask questions that haven't already been answered. We lose our own perspective and imagination and in this everyone is impoverished: ourselves and anyone who looks to us in vain for fresh insight or understanding.**

Artists try to make the most of their minds. In the quest for predictability, we risk making the least of ours. Artists think for themselves. In doing so, they claim the right to influence the future of their own lives, of their work, and of anyone who witnesses it. These aren't the stale, frightened minds of executives who can't imagine even participating in a different scenario but the highly adaptive minds that seize, in uncertainty and ambiguity, the freedom required for adaptation, variation and change. That's what they can teach us, too.