

Universalmuseum Joanneum Press

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The Human Condition The way we live

Universalmuseum Joanneum, main topic of the year

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Being subject – doesn't that awaken unpleasant associations of dependency, helplessness and servitude? That being human means being subject to circumstances is something we don't often make clear to ourselves. But we feel and see, sometimes even with an eerie fascination, how fragile, dependent and inadequate human existence is. How it shuttles back and forth between poverty and luxury, health and sickness, happiness and despair.

Hannah Arendt thought differently about the human condition. The classic condition of mortality and finiteness she contrasts with natality, birth as a new beginning. Yes, we are mortal, but we are also creatures who can make a new start. And only because we are mortal and beginners on the world stage, newcomers introducing our threads into the warp and woof of existence, and living, dwelling, leaving works behind, acting and finally disappearing again, can there be a narrative about each and every one of us.

So if we look closer, conditions are enabling. They reveal to us in the first place what it means to *be* this particular way. Along with natality and mortality, Arendt also names three other basic conditions of human existence: life, worldliness and plurality. Three basic activities correspond to these: working, producing and action. But that does not mean that the conditionality was there first, and an activity came along later. It's more the case that living *takes place* in working – and (as the flip side of working) in resting, eating, consuming, playing and procreating. Arendt's interpretation of the condition "life" is the biological process of living, metabolism, the constant self-consumption and renewed life of the species, i.e. the great cycle of nature. In the activity of working, we take part in this sheer being alive. We are *animalia laborantia*.

Animal laborans works. And consumes. Harnessed in the rhythm of life and the species, knowing no beginning or end. Labour and rest, work and consumption, day and night, life and death succeed each other time and again in an eternal circle like the tides or the seasons. The whole cosmos is a cycle in which our little eddies of life revolve, bear fruit, and in the process that maintains them finally annihilate themselves and flow back into the macrocosm. Living means being unconditionally subject to these imperatives. Admittedly, the Old Testament also extols the blessing that working can confer on an entire life. This blessing lies in the even rhythm of

labour and reward, working and eating, effort and rest, in the pleasure taken in the functioning of a healthy body, and the superfluity of strength with which work produces added value and the species is fruitful. So is that the way we live? No. *Animal laborans* is not a particular person. *Animal laborans* is a perspective.

Because we are also creatures of the world. The world is a place where we can live. A constant element that we create and shape, an artificial, cultural world of things. The basic condition of worldliness is our dependence on objects that not only serve to keep us alive and vanish again in the consumption, but in which human life, which would by nature be homeless, can be at home. This basic condition is fulfilled quite specifically in the activity of producing (an environment that also includes preserving, exploiting, using and contemplating) – as *homo faber*. *Homo faber* constructs himself a world. He creates works. Both as *artifex* and *creator*, he is master of his object right down to the possibility of destroying it again. He generates worlds of self-will. But this self-will is always a worldly will. It is a will for a being that in its individuality does not find it enough to take part in the potentially imperishable life of the species. Because the being has an identity and a narrative manifest in its works that it constantly regenerates therewith, ranging from drinking vessels to landscape design. Even if producing is dependent on the resources of nature and reliant on them, it is itself no longer nature since it breaks through the eternal cycle of genesis and decay to end up on a new linear, temporal level. The activity of producing has its *own* temporal sequence – a beginning and an end. Though as an activity it is of course a process, yet it is not one that simply consumes and renews itself. A work comes out of it that can be released into the world and *is* itself “world” that it consciously shapes.

But what would the work be in the world without other observers? In principle, we might imagine *homo faber* in the singular, alone with his works – likewise the *animal laborans*, enacting its life all by itself. But what happens in *shared* observing and talking about it, what finally generates *sense*, narrative(s), memory and identity/-ies is only possible with the third basic condition, plurality. They are the activities of action and speaking. Because we are plural, unique individuals, because we are *people* not person, not “the being” of man, there is a weave of references, a texture of relationships, links, and entanglements.

Plurality is not just external diversity; it is not the uniqueness of our genetic codes or our diverse socialization. The unmistakably unique element of “who you are” manifesting itself in speaking and acting eludes any attempt to define it in words and describe its characteristics. This attempt gets stuck in the “what” instead of ascertaining the “who.” So plurality is not a characteristic, but a *plurality of perspectives*, the sundry different places where each of us find ourselves, where what is common to us, the world, shows itself to us in all its different facets. And plurality is the unpredictability and spontaneity of our unique ability to start over.

We fulfil this basic condition of plurality in shared acting and speaking. Hannah Arendt calls this the “political” aspect. The political aspect, the being together in the (thoroughly controversial!) exchange of different perspectives, demands and generates at the same time a whole specific phenomenological space – *public* space.

Private and public are spheres that we create. Spheres that have physiognomies of their own that enable things to appear in a certain way, that place them in the light or shroud them in darkness. How we draw these boundaries, where we draw them and what we want to achieve thereby can in itself become an object of discussion once again. In every case, the object concerned changes its form of appearance through the differing physiognomies of the private and public spheres. For example, love between two people as a private matter is an object requiring protection (sometimes even furtiveness), and generally therefore seeks and finds it. Too much of the bright light of the public sphere or too many interested glances could destroy it. Two people in love are not interested in the world of shared human affairs. As Arendt says, that world “goes up in flames” between them. But sometimes the world will not allow that. If love is therefore made a political concern, if it goes out into the street and demands its rights, if it is no longer just clandestine but wants to have a say in the world, it has become something else – the shared concern of many people who act together. In this case, discourses are made visible, codes are reshaped and the world we live in is changed.

Likewise the worlds of self-will, the objects produced by the master, the *artifex*, can take on different forms of appearance in the sundry spheres of “private,” and “public,” “life,” “world” and “plurality.” As works of art, they can become objects of public discussion. They can “seem” or “appear” as witnesses of a specific, perhaps past world. They can function as “memories” (if we bring them to life in shared conversation) and tell us stories. They can ennoble the mundane. But they can also be employed for the simple purpose of living. In short, they can be utterly “consumed” as consumer goods.

Because ultimately, it is all a matter of perspective. Here, Hannah Arendt issues a warning. In her view, the *animal laborans* perspective, which sees fast-moving consumer goods in everything, has gained the upper hand in the Western capitalist world. In parallel, the experiences of shared action and even producing have almost lapsed into oblivion. The constant dynamisation of capital and the virtualisation of our environments no longer generate the very constancy of a world in which one can live. Arendt considers in fact the *animal laborans* of today as a being living a rootless, worldless existence in the desert. Because even if a small part of the world population manages to minimize the troubles and vexations of life as far as possible at the cost of others, the leisure time that we gain thereby does not free us up for the “higher” things (as Marx hoped), but “is never used for anything but consumption, and the more time is allowed [*animal laborans*], the greedier and more threatening his wishes and his appetite become” (Arendt, *Vita Activa*, 157). According to Arendt, modern life consists of a society of “job holders,” in which the only individual decision to be taken consists of abandoning one’s own identity in order to function automatically in the stream of life and numb one’s own feelings. The banality of evil, which Arendt so prominently criticizes elsewhere, lies ultimately also in this instability. It is not necessarily always just totalitarianism that forces a single, implacable face on the world. The *oikonomia* (household management, i.e. life) is today likewise an imperative forcing us – now on a globalised scale – into a *single* perspective that makes the multiple perspectives obsolete and ultimately persuades us to forget that we could always indeed “start over.”

But it wouldn't be Hannah Arendt, if she didn't make us aware precisely through this reflection that things could be different – and that our limitations are also our opportunities. As long as none of the perspectives grow outsize or one-dimensional, we can draw on various dimensions of experience. No conditionality conditions so absolutely as to predetermine the “nature” of “mankind” inescapably. As long as we actively ask ourselves what our world should look like and how we should shape it, and how worlds are to be created that have permanence and offer perspectives (instead of just stimulation), we remain creatures of the world “minding about the world.” As long as “the way we live” is not just a statement about an entity of the species but is an object of discussion for *people*, plurality is maintained. Being human means being subject to circumstances – but that does not mean being fixed. On the contrary, it is in fact an enablement of our freedom to start over.

The six exhibitions grouped together under the motto “The way we live” reflect very different but complementary facets of various aspects of the *Human Condition*.

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Folk Life Museum, 16th February – 26th October 2010

Showpieces. Masterpieces of Goldsmithing from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection

Alte Galerie, 7th May 2010 – 31st October 2010

BLESS N°41. Retroperspective Home

Kunsthhaus Graz, 22nd May 2010 – 29th August 2010

Fabricators of the world. Scenarios of Self-will

Schloss Trautenfels, 3th June 2010 – 31st October 2010

Alois Mosbacher. Outside Fiction

Neue Galerie im Künstlerhaus, 11th June 2010 – 15th August 2010

Human Condition. Empathy and Emancipation in Precarious Times

Kunsthhaus Graz, 12th June 2010 – 12th September 2010

(Sophie Loidolt)

Literature:

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.