

Hans-Christian Dany

Ode to routine  
where nothing is lacking  
and excess can flourish  
instead of catering to the project.

I try to give what I do a rhythm that hardly changes, seven days a week. Whatever ingrains itself as habit becomes routine. Whenever a routine gets interrupted, it has to be set back in motion. When that motion runs consistently from day to day, it gets into a flow and almost takes care of itself.

Still groggy from sleep, I try to find the beat as soon as I wake up. Although I'm barely awake and every action feels impossible, I do it anyway. I don't need to be struck by an epiphany to synchronize my hands with the rhythm. There's plenty lingering from the day before, and a loophole will turn up soon enough.

After an hour, at six, I smoke my second cigarette. On weekdays, I lose the beat for the first time around seven o'clock. I can keep it up a little longer on the weekend. But during the week, I just know the alarm is going to go off anytime now. Before it does, I rouse my son from sleep, head right down to the street, and buy bread. We sit at breakfast until it's time for me to take him to school. Then I start writing again. Under pressure, I pick up the pace briefly before going swimming for twenty minutes at nine. Without paying attention to the time, I try to do everything so monotonously my neighbors could set their clocks by me. There also has to be an element of boredom I can get carried away by. Not overly excited, I stare at the screen and press the buttons. At twelve, the rhythm leaves me. I feel a momentary pang of melancholy as I brush up against the sense of a latent void.

Nothing gets done through rhythm alone. There are other rules too. I'm not allowed to sit at any desks, doing so would be too reminiscent of work. It has to be a table with another function, like the kitchen table, which is for eating and where writing is only secondary. Whatever I do should operate on the verge of leisure. I also like the thought of my neighbors whispering: "Oh, that poor jobless man, at least he knows how to keep busy." I would like no one to expect anything of me, let alone entertain the idea that I'm *researching* something. Just the thought of obscene questions about "what I'm working on right now" makes me uncomfortable. If and when an offense like that does occur, I stammer out some gibberish about which no one could possibly care to hear any more after a minute's time. It goes without saying that I don't call what I do work. In the margins of my expectation-free space, I keep busy. My business is like smoking. I can't entirely explain it, but I derive immense pleasure from it, can rhapsodize about it at length, and will do it again tomorrow. At this point, I can smoke in such a way that others feel like smoking too when they watch me. I'm great at enticing nonsmokers to smoke. And I hope to get to the same point with writing too.

Some people criticize my tactics for recapturing a space for unjustified business. They say I'm a parasite, because I let other people give me temporary lifts on their projects. Aside from enjoying the contact, I experience short-term movement with people who are working toward something as an invigorating disruption that keeps me from getting mired in the soup of my own system. So, as not to inextricably entangle myself in those external disruptions, I take care not to let anyone give me a lift too often. It's a matter of balance, and I have to pay attention to it.

Sometimes my rhythm condenses into ideas of goals. If I like them, I sail with them, let their wind carry me along awhile, only to jump back off at the right moment and resume my routine without a prospect. The fact that I would rather operate slightly under the radar in that state is founded in the experience that things run along just fine that way and will continue to do so. Rhythm replaces both justification and goal, and it gives me the grounding necessary to maintain a relatively disconnected form of productivity that moves parallel to the mainstream. Its ongoing routine gives me the footing that keeps me from slipping into a vortex of certain ideas in my surroundings. A footing has the advantage over a stance in that the body can stay in motion. It allows for the flexibility to sidestep a vortex produced by a particular language—as well as by money—and makes self-determined action nearly impossible. That language uses the word *research* in an inflationary way to manage behavior wherever the action of artists is supposed to get translated into words. It's understandable that *research* in particular was able to devolve into effective jargon. Aside from the boom around digital search machines, there has been a surge in so-called artistic research, a development both welcomed and fostered at an institutional level. Underlying motives—like equal opportunity for artistic and scientific methods and/or imparting

techniques previously considered exclusive secret knowledge—may well have been benevolent. But at this point, precisely because of steps toward leveling the playing field, normalization, and transparency, artistic research has revealed itself as primarily a mechanism for integrating artistic processes into the society of control.

It's easier to assess the ensuing motion with this retrospective formula: what was the question? Did you keep it in mind, and did you proceed methodically? What we now call work is oriented toward added value, toward gaining insight and the communication thereof. While those things may not be handled all that strictly, an instruction manual can still help you pack your deeds in a box conducive to manageability. And that even manages to make artistic research attractive to a lot of people too. A construction of meaning ostensibly founded in gaining insight masks over somewhat difficult questions about the vague “why” behind acts of art. If moving through the fog for no apparent reason provokes a sense of insecurity, it's something that no longer has to be endured. Comfortable, but deprived of possibilities out of the ordinary, those liberated from the risk posed by uncontrolled motion can lean back without needing to pay all that much attention to whatever else is going on, or where they might veer off track, since all energies have now been directed at a goal now known, and the way there appears transparent.

Artistic research gets framed in the term *project*. It has gone so far that even painting a picture can be reduced to a *project*. The word seems to have replaced all other possibilities, but it initially spread through the administrative sector. If you want to use their money to further your own interests, you have to pack your desire in the form of a project. Now people superimpose the term over their own desires in anticipatory obedience, dressing their deeds presentably in a relevancy qua societally recognized value. In using the apparently harmless word *project*—which is incidentally happy to pass itself off as progressive when it isn't—artistic activity gets reinterpreted, and it loses its open end to a goal you work towards economically. The economy that enters the process through the project has its root in the Greek *oikos* (house). Residents economize on wood, let's say, so the supply will last long enough to keep warm over winter. Economizing concerns for a specified goal subdue any urge to light a huge fire in the fall, because then there might not be enough wood later. That's obviously a sound practical consideration. But transferred to the artistic process, economizing thinking produces lame results fast, since the possibilities of what gets set in motion don't even get close to the oven in the first place. The unpredictable can't unfold, because the process has been planned out to generate a specified added value. Signs get set, instead of sounding out their independent existence. Tools get run through a checklist, instead of speaking for themselves. What lives and breathes in the material gets perceived as a simple means to an end. Calling your own motion a project blocks possibilities from surging up in the process, because you want things to turn out according to plan. And when you do reach your stated goal, your feet are going to stay on the ground. Why jump up in the air ecstatically on arrival when all you've done is reach a predetermined destination, instead of going for a confused and euphoric swim in the unknown?

The *Duden* dictionary of the German language defines a project as a plan, an undertaking, a draft, a scheme. Linguistically, it differs from the continual *progression*, whose motion can extend into the unknown. The *projection* is close to the project. To project means *to throw or cast forward*, and it was initially used for drafting geometric forms on a surface. Later, projectors would cast images onto screens at the movies. With the project, it's the same word, but in the perfect participle: *what has been thrown or cast forward*. The throwing has been completed, so the distance to be covered has been set, meaning the architects of the plan can now use it to draw out their magic triangle of time, cost, and scope.

In German, the project first appeared in the form of construction plans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The imagined building gets rendered in draft form, so its actual construction can be undertaken. In the late 1960s, the term wandered into art by way of the *earth projects* by US-American land art artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. Picturing the quantities of sand they would need to move in the desert to make their visions reality, they started organizing themselves like companies.

The project is anything but an open form. It is defined as one-off plans in which managed deeds adapt to assumed constraints in the interest of reaching a goal. According to the German industrial standard DIN 69901, a project is plans for work whose progress is governed by time, energy, and material constraints. Through the notion of lack and a resultant pragmatism in planning, the principle of added value insinuates itself into the artistic process. The discontinuous project subverts the infinite potential of the unforeseeable to the ultimate control of the predictable. To guarantee control, the project builds on competence. Valorizing human skills means suppressing the inherent powers of speech, technology, and materials. You try to take things into your own hands and carry them in a straight line to the goal. To arrive there, the project avoids empty forms that are susceptible to invasion by unknowns and aberrations. Bodies in motion get preoccupied with mental pictures of what they are supposed to become. Intuitive reactions and the sense of inner necessity are rationalized away by goal-oriented pragmatism and shunted into a decorative role. You heed the voice of reason, and you can follow it unquestioningly, ignoring more mysterious-sounding voices and their intoxicating suggestions.

While the land artists were introducing the project to art, the New York gallerist and carpet dealer Seth Siegelaub was introducing the term project to the art business as part of his effort to land on a commodifying framework for conceptual art. Absent financial success as an art dealer, Siegelaub—who sold carpets to finance his art operation—proceeded particularly systematically. Faced with real-world failure, he wanted at the very least to leave behind a possible business model. As with most attempts at reconciling artists' interests with a capitalist structure, the antagonism between the logic of exchange and overspending in the artistic working process could hardly be resolved.

In Europe, the project got rediscovered in the 1990s, a time when work was taking on increasingly immaterial forms whose fleeting nature required a linguistic vessel. The potential expansion of possibilities for what art could be conflicted with a social-democratic critique that accused artists of having invented the prototype of neoliberal “self-exploitation” by virtue of generally having too much to do and wasting their energy uneconomically. In a fatal *argumentum a contrario*, that critique acknowledges the prevailing order of lack instead of anyone's own deviation from it. It's a destructive fallacy that gets activated whenever the artistic search gets formalized linguistically as a project, in line with economic logic, and subordinated to a reluctant economizing force. Carried along in the slipstream of artistic research's establishment as a genre, the project wandered from official jargon into everyday speech over the course of the 2000s. What claims to be a contemporary shift—as if artists hadn't been doing research since time immemorial, just following their own rules—is upon closer inspection little more than a watered-down readiness to recognize the prevailing reality construct, assimilate deviations from it, and put humans back in the center as the dominant servants of added value.

Things could have gone much further in the opposite direction, since at one point people did start parting ways with anthropocentrism in art, of all places. The painter Willi Baumeister once wrote “the artist doesn't know how to do anything”<sup>1</sup> in “Das Unbekannte als zentraler Wert” (The Unknown as a Central Value), and that was already seventy years ago. In Baumeister's model, artists make do with an initiating role. “A certain type of speculative person” projects the *vision-object* as movement, but leaves what has been set in motion on the way to the “apparent goal” and observes how it takes off from the runway. “The preconceived goal only functioned as an incentive” to swim out in a disconnected motion and penetrate into the blind spot of the known. By surrendering the task of control, you can access realities as yet unknown.

If you're going to stay outside the sphere of known circles, it looks like you'll have to distance yourself from its language and order. That begs the question whether you might be blocking artistic potential as soon as you call the way there—the line of flight—work, because at this point, the concept of work feels contaminated by project thinking. You can find this literal reading neurotic, but I think you'd be underestimating how value systems use language to infiltrate behavior. The overspending on (to you) unknowns that is necessary if you want to go any further gets blocked, because it's all too time-intensive. You economize and stick to what you know to get things done quickly. One possible emergency exit from that roundabout is a continuity without beginning or end. Daily routine can furnish the necessary escape route, however easily overlooked, to circumvent the stifling demands of the production of meaning. Getting started no longer poses a difficulty, because you never stop. You also revoke the authority to act from external occasion.

Everyday routine mitigates the state of insecurity that can be a side effect of the elusiveness of meaning. At some point, I know nothing else. My routine enables me to bypass the question of what I'm ultimately going to get for what I do and resist relevancy traps and the security and vanity baiting that comes with them.

And, if you're going to survive in the wrong environment, it might actually be smarter to affirm this non-criticism. Criticism doesn't only risk optimizing project culture by pointing out its blind spots, it also gives it meaning. It may be better to go at it backwards: the more I treat what I do as meaningless, the less I'll be forced to justify it in response to the wrong line of questioning. What I do seems too small to ask about its relevancy. Being a meaningless dwarf, I can just slip through below the authority of a language that questions my value.

In realities beneath the controlling standards of a misguided pretense, it's also easier to conspire without words and by that, you avoid making yourself manageable through communication. Superficially diluting the self allows you to become one of many and of much, and to grow as such.

7

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are translated and correspond to the German original “Das Unbekannte als zentraler Wert” in Willi Baumeister's *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst*, Curt C. Schwab Verlag, Stuttgart 1947.