

A simple question

I was sitting alone and observing a seagull when a stranger approached me asking, *who are you?* I knew I was not a seagull, neither a stranger, but I did not have one answer to give him. *Who am I* lives in a dialogue with someone or something - in a relation with the stranger, parents, teachers, classmates, colleagues, friends and others. The sense of my identity is continuously being influenced by my surroundings. I told him that I'm a poor student, a beloved lady, a beloved daughter, a Latvian, a bit Russian, a bit Saaremaa Estonian, a bit Dutch, an immigrant, a social researcher, and also an artist. I'm someone who does useless things, I'm a skinny white girl in a red t-shirt, a hot lady, a strong woman, an annoying employee, a bad friend and I will be many more things in the future. As more things I am, as more things I can relate to. Without a memory I could not relate to the stranger. We would discover each other by exploring what is there in the present moment. If we did not speak a language, we would probably invent a language. If we were the only people on the world, we would probably start creating something together or separately - next to each other. I wonder in how many different relations do I experience my identity on a daily basis? The expressions that I use with my friend are not the same as I use with my lover. My teacher talks to me in a different way than my boss. The expression of my identity always depends on the other who reflects on me. Now we are together in one mental or physical space with the stranger. We interact because this way we realize ourselves. It could be that I really want him or perhaps I don't, but even in a constructive interaction most of the people want to feel able to make an independent decision in order to express whom they are. It could be a decision about something I want to do together with the stranger or on my own. How does my sense of autonomy relate to the other? How do I relate to my sense of autonomy? What role does an artist have in this context? The current wave of unrest and xenophobia in our environment makes me want to explore and delve into the notions of identity, autonomy and power. Migration in the globalized world, the desire or necessity to explore the world means meeting a lot of strangers with different cultural backgrounds, histories and thinking traditions. We enjoy the pleasures, tastes and diversity, but how to learn ways to construct a new relationship while not losing our self-expression? Could it be that the next generations will be a mix of more identities than we are now? How are we going to cope with accepting our and their diversity? To exclude the other means to also exclude myself from a physical or mental space of togetherness, the variety and emotional roller coasters it provides. How to make sure that connections between people, our social capital, does not become a forgotten value? Could autonomy be explored and experienced in a conscious, responsible and flexible way, avoiding the complete separation from the other human? What role does autonomy and power play in being treated equally and respectfully? What role does an artist have in the context of autonomy, identity and power?

Most of the people in their daily life belong to an organization. It helps to structure one's life. It is a place where the power dimension and responsibility comes in a play between the other and me. Interviewing professor Dr. Kees Boersma in Faculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam helps me understand the notions of autonomy and power in terms of

behavior from the perspective of sociology. During my research I'm looking at the artworks where a socially constructed reality is in a play with an influence of an internal, external or imaginary power. In order to start off I'm asking Kees about the notion *autonomy* and he introduces me to his perspective: "The notion of autonomy is connected to notions "ownership" and "identity". Are you able to make decisions on your own or are you constrained by other people or organizational rules? There is a power dimension in the question. Are we as individuals able to make decisions based on a free will? According to Henry Minszerg, author on organization theory, in knowledge organizations people claim autonomy based on their professionalism. The extreme opposite to autonomy is a production environment in which people are only treated as "radar in a machine" – an individual who is treated on the basis of their output, rather than their expertise or their knowledge. The notion of autonomy is connected to the notion of free will. Individual autonomy generally is understood as the capacity to be one's own person. Generally, one can distinguish autonomy from freedom in that the latter concerns the ability to act, without external or internal constraints. In other words, you can also say that freedom is a precondition for individual autonomy." People sometimes confuse the notion of "freedom" with "autonomy" in terms of behavior. When a mentally disabled prisoner wants to kill someone, but has no weapon, he is not able to act autonomously. The one who has power over him is able to decide if he will be free to act upon his decisions. The level of responsibility embedded in a decision depends on many aspects, such as upbringing, education, personality, habits, etc. If a person does not have significant mental limitations in their daily living skills, he should be able to study in order to empower himself and to become autonomous and responsible. I was wondering if we are born with the need for autonomy or we learn it? Kees: "A baby cries to say "I'm here". That is an act of autonomy. But is there a reflection upon that action? A baby who is around the age of 3 or 4 is already acting as a human being, and you can start recognizing a character, but to say that he has the ownership is too far. An ownership comes with the education and with becoming part of the world, becoming an adult. It is nature and nurture. Pierre Bourdieu's connects it to the concept of "habitus". It is a concept about an embodied history. This could be actual in a former Soviet Union country. What it means is that I can survive a habitus of a particular society. Ways of doing things. You can grow into another society and to learn other habitus and even appreciate them, and this goes together with socialization between people. It means copying a behavior, learning, talking to people. After we are born, we receive education, we grow up and then we internalize social norms. You can learn other habitus but that takes time. But it is possible because we have forms of capital. We have money as a capital but we also have a social capital - knowing other people. There is also cultural capital (our education, diplomas, our access to a new society, possibility to travel). We have social structures, for example, rules of traffic, and on the other hand there is an individual. Me on my bike I'm a part of the city structure. But I can decide not to stop for the traffic light when it's red".

Autonomy is one of the most valuable capitals for a human. It allows me as an artist to create free work, this way I am able to reflect on the issues that are relevant to me and to do my job. Autonomy allows me to take a distance from others, but at the same time others are the source of my inspiration, dreams and hopes. Autonomy also allows me to express Love.

Psychologist Henry Murray includes autonomy in his list of human needs. He describes autonomy as “to get free, shake off restraint, or break out of confinement. To resist coercion and restriction. To be independent and free to act according to impulse. To defy conventions”.¹ The notion of breaking free is connected to the notion of the prison, but what is a prison? A prison basically is a place where you can’t exercise your free will, where you have to obey strict rules. Sometimes people refer the term “prison” as to a bad situation with very little autonomy. When my family refers to their past, living in the Soviet Union with strict rules and strict censorship, it sounds like they have been living in a kind of prison where walls had eyes and ears. People did not feel free to make their own decisions. On the other hand we live in a social context together with others, so we can never be completely free. We can be more or less free, more or less autonomous, so is it always more or less “prison”. Does it mean that a complete freedom is an illusion? And if so, what can I do to ease my existence in this challenging context? My life is structured in such a way that it is rather difficult to not to be controlled in my self-expression. I’m being watched by systems and structures. I receive letters with expectations, I have appraisals at work, I have assessments at school. Somebody is watching me on the street because I look suspicious to him or her. A sales person keeps an eye if I give the right amount of money for the thing I desire to obtain. There are applications on my phone that keep track of where I’m heading during my day. When I’m 5 minutes late at my work, my boss gives me a concerned look as a sign of critique. “We are both prisoners and prison masters, constantly policing ourselves and each other”². I am thinking in terms of images about an autonomous person, about his or her facial traits, expressions, about their body language. How does a more or less autonomous person look like and how to recognize a pattern of a controlled behavior? Who is happy in a prison and why? How can I know that I’m autonomous in a relation with others? Kees: “Are you able to act not according to the social conventions of the organizations you are in? Do you think you could wear the same cloth if you would work in the bank, as you would wear in the Rietveld academy? It is being in a relation with social conventions. Measuring the autonomy is to which extent you are able to oppose that social convention. Some people can do that also if they are in the position of authority. Harold’s Garfinkel’s concept of Social breaching suggests that this opposing is not only about acting funny but also about recognizing what is normal. For example what is a normal behavior in a metro line? You can go there and act stupid, do anything. It is not by what you do, but rather by the way people react you will recognize social conventions. By breaking them you can figure out what is not ‘normal’.” I understand the mechanism of a controlled behavior, but I wonder what role does a controlled behavior play in the dynamics between me and the other person? What happens if a person whose behavior is more radar like has the control over the autonomous one, because of more formal power? Is the worst scenario in this case a dystopia? For example, in the business environment people tend to measure their well being linearly, in terms of numbers and time. If the right numbers go up, it is usually good. If they go up quickly it is better. It is easy to

¹ Henry Murray, *Explorations in Personality*, (Oxford University Press, 1938)

² George Orwell, *Animal farm* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1945)

understand the principle. In this context destructive criticism or disapproval can also be a consequence to an outer power, such as economy. A controlled behavior of different forms is very common. What about personal freedom and ability to express one's identity in a social context, for example within a certain structure? Should I or should I not give up part of my identity in order to understand the other, in order to assimilate? Rules that are developed within a certain structure are helping to create an order that helps us to facilitate particular processes but they can also create a gap between people who are in it. "When lonely, people may explicitly seek out companionship; when controlled, people may explicitly seek out autonomy"³. I wonder if we gain or lose our autonomy by separating our self from the other human? Kees: "It's a paradox, because when you lose yourself you become more isolated because you are losing the responsibility in a social relationship, so in a way you become less autonomous. People work a lot at home and you can say it is autonomous, but over a longer period of time it is isolated from the dynamics within the organization. Autonomy is human being in relation to others. An isolated human has hardly any connections to it". Thinking further about paradoxes of a social bound and connecting it to art, in 1980 artist duo Marina Abramovic and Ulay recorded about 4 minutes long performance titled "Rest Energy". In this performance 2 people are holding an arrow on the weight of their bodies, and the arrow is pointed at the heart of Abramovic, creating a tension. They have small microphones near their hearts, so they can hear their own heartbeats and intensity. According to the artist this moment felt much longer. In my interpretation this work points at the paradox of a social bound - by being two people in this situation they are referring to the other and at the same time to the self. Arrow being pointed at Abramovic puts her in a vulnerable position, takes her control away and puts her in a situation where she has to trust Ulay that he won't hurt her. How do we understand the notion of power? What could be an imaginary power or fictional power? Is media also a fictional power? Kees: "We can look at the idea of social theorist Steven Lukes about layered model of power. There is a coercive power (my boss) that can influence me even against my will. That is a visible power. There is also a hidden power. It is an ability to set the agenda – the organization moving a certain direction (for example - accepted and not accepted art). If I'm able to participate in the meetings and group discussion where issue is addressed, I am part of the meeting - an agenda setting power. I am able to set the agenda together with others. This power is more hidden and not so visible. Power is also a force of habit "This is the way we are used to do it" – an invisible power dimension about a social convention. If I'm new to a certain society as a migrant, I recognize that some rules are taken for granted; I have to obey them, to be part of the society. I have to live according to that set of norms. Media contributes to a general discourse. The way we talk about particular issues is never neutral. In the way people speak about issues there is a lot of power exclusion, the dominant discourse. Other ways are not looked at. It is called a hegemonic power." We live in a socially created reality, which has a potential to become a dystopia. Living in one big

³ The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior , Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, Department of Psychology University of Rochester, (Rochester: Psychological Inquiry 2000, Vol. 11, No. 4, 227–268)

web, everyone experiences the social vibrations whether they are directly involved in the actions or not. The question of the power as a capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events is very interesting. Adolf Hitler is an example on how a real not mythological half human and half animal could have had such a strong image of his identity, that he was able to represent it strongly to the public to generate repetitive patterns in a society worldwide. Empathy sometimes falls short and a power addiction can develop into violence. On the other hand a lot is up to the reaction of the less powerful and how strong their counterforce is. In the wild life we can see that number one is the strongest, and takes precedence in the consumption of food and sex over all the others. The new number one has to win fights to get the leadership position. In this case an upward powerdrive has to be exercised. In many organizations a similar principle is used in order to direct the course of the business. People operate within a hierarchical structure where they can move up or down, establish and change their position. This is where notions “ambition” and “competition” come in the picture. To be able to afford my education and to experience a version of life, which fits my expression, I have a job. I have a feeling that the job doesn't really need me in particular, because the wheel will turn also without me. I need the job so I'm turning the wheel together with others. The organization has a hierarchical structure with standardized work procedures. Employees are being monitored and reported, so it is quite easy to let go of unnecessary problems. Within a hierarchical system people with least responsibilities are easily replaceable. I am one of them. Employees with higher positions stay in their positions for a longer time and have more financial security. They are committed, have worked longer and harder to secure it. Due to my study and other life goals I am not able to take up more responsibility and I enjoy what I do at the moment. I like my job, my colleagues and customers are mostly nice people. The most wonderful thing is of course that I am able to study. After one year of having a certain constructive routine in my life – a part time job and a study, one of my managers criticized me for lack of growth and ambition. It was an awkward moment. I had no doubts that I'm developing, but perhaps not the way it was expected. Apparently becoming something like the one above you can be an unwritten rule. It is funny that when you are happy doing your job, but unwilling to move upwards, you might get classified as somebody who has no ambition, lazy or careless. This incident could have made my autonomy and development vulnerable. People in vulnerable situations fear to lose something if they feel as if they are not approved. They might get criticized and punished. There are workplaces and situations where people don't want to do their job because they haven't found the right place, or they don't work in an ethical way. When leaders are at least a bit involved in the daily operations, people and their characters and needs, they deliver more adequate rules and criticism. “Natural developmental tendencies toward autonomy (i.e., internal integration) and homonomy (i.e., social integration), like other natural tendencies such as intrinsic motivation, are assumed to require nutriments or supports from the social environment to function effectively. More specifically, the natural human propensities toward self-organization and an organized relation to a larger social structure are understood to require satisfaction of the three innate or fundamental psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Thwarted satisfaction of these needs results invariably in negative

functional consequences for mental health and often for ongoing persistence and performance.”⁴

Filmmakers and writers have been expressing the problematic aspect of people making their life difficult in a situation when they have a free will, choice and a level of autonomy not to make such a choice. A “prison” that is and at the same time is not there. A surrealist film directed by Bunuel “The Exterminating Angel” (1962) is an interesting example of a mind trap of a group of individuals. People have gathered at the dinner party from which they can’t escape. The guests of the dinner party realize that they are stuck in the room without knowing who or what is keeping them and can’t leave the room psychologically. This micro world of society falls apart in a brutal way. It might be that Bunel is pointing at the social ritual. Each character in the movie reminds of how silly human idiosyncrasies can be. Identities of the characters are slowly changing, till the point where people eat paper and try to kill each other. People are not going mad because they are bad people but because they are very desperate and human. Questions are raised about why these people are stuck in this room that is slowly becoming progressively worse and then answered in half-truths through rituals of black magic involving chicken feet. Characters are all the time questioning, why they can't leave the room, even though it is not important. They betray each other to survive the experience. At the end of the film, when they manage to exit the room, everyone is now trapped in the church and is again worried and questioning. Characters in this film don't realize that their place in the world has been sealed and that questioning it will only cause more confusion. Yorgos Lanthimos film "The lobster" (2015) shows a dystopian near future with many strange rules and a love story in between all the cruelty and strangeness. As a single person you are not allowed to walk on the street, you have to go to a hotel, where within 40 days you have to find your match. If you don't succeed, you are turned into an animal. When you enter the hotel, you can choose what kind of animal you wish to be turned into, in case if you don't manage to find a match. The main character thinks that he has found the match but the lady turns out to be violent, so he escapes from the hotel. In the forest there is another society – the single people who are not allowed to be in love. During the film different eyes are observing and controlling every step of an individual. When you are watching the movie, first you think, what a strange place, but when you think about it bit further, you realize that in a way this is quite close to our reality. Thinking further about real life dystopias, Russian writer Anton Chekhov as a child was suffering from his father's tyranny. Later on, inspired by his brother who was researching prisons at the time as part of his law studies, Anton Chekhov became obsessed with the issue of prison reform. In 1890 Chekhov went on a journey to the Russian penal colony on Sakhalin Island, north of Japan. He spent three months interviewing thousands of convicts and settlers. I see it as Chekhov's attempted to shorten the distance between the excluded monsters, which were not real to him before he went there. In his observations he also included a description of the island's sexual system, wherein everything illegal in normal society has become custom. “Despite the laws against fornication and adultery,

⁴ The “What” and “Why” of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior , Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, Department of Psychology University of Rochester, (Rochester: Psychological Inquiry 2000, Vol. 11, No. 4, 227–268)

the colony provided no separate housing for female convicts; the penal authorities distributed newly arrived women among the male inhabitants as domestic partners, taking the youngest and the most attractive for their own use. The regime of coercive lawlessness that governed Russia's penal universe thus made no attempt to regulate sexual conduct. With no respect for individuality or privacy, the result was not freedom of sexual expression but a condition of sexual impunity that mirrored the impunity of administrative rule.”⁵ In Anton Chekhov's story “In a strange land” a wealthy Russian man has a French companion/ servant living with him. Their relationship is difficult because the Russian man is exercising his power over the French man in a form of communication as a casual teasing. At the same time the French man lets the Russian man abuse the power. When the French man is finally ready to leave the situation, he can't because he has no passport. They stay together and life goes on the same way. “Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.”⁶

The question after all is also how to counterbalance, since things tend to collapse when the weight of the power is shifting just one direction. John Nash was an American mathematician with fundamental contributions in game theory. The interesting thing is that Nash's work has provided insight into the factors that govern chance and decision-making inside complex systems found in daily life. There is a famous movie “Beautiful mind” about the life of John Nash. John Nash invented a theory of rational bargaining. “A Nash equilibrium occurs when all the players are simultaneously making a best reply to the strategy choices of the others.”⁷ The possibilities are laid out in a matrix called “Prisoners dilemma”. Imagine that two men got in the jail for the crime they committed together. A police officer is talking to each of them separately, and promises that if one betrays the other, the one that tells the truth will get free. Each of them is given a choice to protect themselves at the expense of the other. However acting only in each of their own interests, they do not have a high chance of leading to an ideal outcome. You might get free by betraying the other but you have to consider that the other might also betray you. The logics of the Nash equilibrium is that people gain a bit less for themselves when they consider the other, but in most of the cases they still gain more than if they don't cooperate. What could be done in the field of autonomy and power, by using the means and tools of artistic expression? Kees: “The act of rebellion and social breaching that is what artists are doing, sometimes very visible, Banksy for example. That is becoming a brand, but at least a group of people ask for attention for things of concern, as a mirror. It gives people the feeling of creativity. Not as an instrument but as one of the tools for people in local communities to express themselves other than words and written language. Art is a different way of mobilizing people. I think that there can be a lot of emancipatory power in art. Art also plays with our imagination. It asks - can you imagine that there are other societies possible than you are stuck in now? With art you can enlarge an imaginary power of people. A film and comic strip

⁵ The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-siècle Russia, Laura Engelstein (USA: Cornell University Press, 1994)

⁶ George Orwell, Animal farm (London: Secker and Warburg, 1945)

⁷ Game Theory – A Very Short Introduction, Ken Binmore, (Oxford university press, 2007)

“Persepolis” by Iranian artist Marjane Satrapi is a nice example on what it means for a human to be oppressed and to become a member of a new society.” Being too certain is boring. Suspense, surprise and a bit of drama is more fun. Variety makes room for new ideas and information. New beliefs, new thoughts are necessary in order to grow and discover new possibilities, but in order to discover something new I need to embrace my own uncertainties, instead of believing somebody else’s certainty. To enjoy the realm of the unknown and find it as a source of pleasure.

Most of the people live in a social context and are connected to each other. Globalization and migration brings different identities closer together and carries along endless opportunities to explore each other. Blurred, hyphenated identities with diverse histories might influence our life more in the future. Nobody can define us as one thing. We are many things and so we have to stay open to the many sides of another person. The risk of defining ourselves as something one is that we tend to position ourselves against all other things that we feel we are not. In the present moment and perhaps even more in the future it will be important to draw a respectful and non-judgmental boundary between our historically shaped self-expressions, and to be open and flexible to histories and backgrounds of others. How someone’s identity is shaped and expressed remains within them, as long as we are able to construct and develop something together or next to each other. Autonomy allows us to take a distance from others, but at the same time others are the source of our inspiration, dreams and hopes. Isolation is not autonomy. Autonomy is human being in relation to others and it comes with a responsibility to others. Despite the fact that ability to explore one’s autonomy is a very important condition for one’s healthy development, in our society the concept of goal and achievement is often dominating the concept of basic human needs. When the outer power and motivation is the dominant one, our intrinsic motivation - performing an action because we enjoy the activity, is weakened. To control someone’s behavior by making them into radar like beings in order to achieve certain goals is neither ethical nor constructive and a closed mind is the quickest path to a real dystopia. We think that we are becoming more free and able to choose from a wide range of directions for our self-expression, but it does not mean that we can cross boundaries of self-expression of other people. A dialogue, education and development of an individual potential carry us further. Taking ownership of my own person and letting others take ownership of themselves and respect that space, instead of denying it, gives me a better chance to live in a healthy, diverse and friendly environment. Art in this context can encourage a sense of self-expression and openness to others, as well as express the beautiful diversity of our present cultural capital.

“If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace.”

Ajahn Chah

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