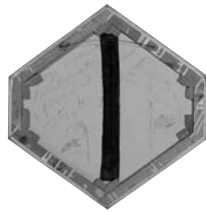


ACADEMIA

Qui es-tu?



edited by
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“KNOW THYSELF!”

BERNARD LIETAER

In the Old Academy, Plato’s Academy, founded in 385-380 BC, there was only one commandment and that was the celebrated “Γνώθι Σεαυτόν” [Gnothi seauton] – “Know Thyself!”. Originally carved on the outer pediment of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, it was passed on to Plato by his master Socrates. This command constituted an invitation to respond to what was at first sight such a simple question, but one which proved to be eternally fertile and profound: “Who are you?”

Consider for a moment how you yourself have responded differently to this question after each important transition in your life.

A work of art, any work of art, is an attempt to answer this question. The story goes that an art dealer bought a Picasso and had come to ask the artist to sign it.

Picasso replied, “I didn’t paint this”.

“But I saw it in the corner of your studio less than a year ago!”

“I often paint paintings that are not Picassos,” the artist responded.

1. Raffaello Sanzio, *The School of Athens* (detail), 1509, showing Plato (left) and Aristotle (right).

Does this mean that true works of art are only those in which the artist can recognise himself?

A significant work of art is one that is capable of asking the viewer the question “who are you?”, of moving him to the point of obliging him to enter into a dialogue with it. Plato’s Academy taught reflection, shaped the minds of those who took part in an ongoing dialogue in which the answer to this question evolved in response to the ever changing dialogue with others.

Our ancestors marked the important turning points in their lives with rites – initiation rituals. These were deliberate, collective acts, the purpose of which was to refresh the answer of the initiated to this very question. A human being was considered to have been born in a container secured by the wisdom of former generations. Our civilization is the first to believe that it can do without these initiation rites, which is why in our modern lives we play these same games “for real”. We no longer see them as formal rituals but reproduce them unconsciously in real life. Are our financial anxieties not a reproduction of the Dionysian rituals in which our hyper-rationalism is suddenly challenged, in which Apollonian certitudes deemed to be unshakeable are all of a sudden questioned?

We find ourselves in the midst of an era of collective initiation – unconscious, no doubt, but none the less powerful for it. Our collective ritual games, our present-day problems – monetary instability, climate change, technological transformations, the clash of civilisations, the disruption of relationships at all levels – have now become global challenges.

Our contemporary artists, these hypersensitive antennae, pick up the changes in civilisation before we lesser mortals are able to feel them; they have expressed them for us by breaking free from the shackles of what academicism had become: a place of conformity and constraint, a yoke formed by the structures of the past. Maybe the time has come to ask ourselves once again that vital, age-old question, but this time in terms of the whole of our human adventure on this planet: “Who are we?”, or better still: “Whom do we wish to become?”