

## **Art and Cognition**

An Attempt to Map Some Relations Between the Work of Rudolf Steiner and Gilles Deleuze.

By Torbjørn Eftestøl

Abstract:

In this paper I investigate some aspects of Rudolf Steiner's and Gilles Deleuze's work. In doing this I focus on art as a form of cognition and relate artistic creativity to Steiner's philosophical conception of truth. I then try to see art and philosophy in relation to the creation of truth and how this relates to Steiner's method as it is presented by Jesaiah Ben-Aharon in the book *The New Experience of the Supersensible*. On this background I find some interesting similarities between Steiner's and Deleuze's conception of artistic creation. Deleuze is seen as investigating the function of art in a way parallell to that of Steiner, and to develop a view of the artistiv endeavour as what he calls «a higher empiricism» which is comparable to the method of Rudolf Stiner's spiritual science.

Rudolf Steiner developed his own philosophy and aesthetic among other out of a confrontation with the work of Goethe, and in one of the his introductions to Goethe's natural science he discusses the relation between art and science underlying and inherent in all of Goethe's work. Contrary to the traditional opposition between science as a quest for truth and art as forms of free imagination and creativity, he relates the two as different methods of one and the same endeavour. Both are operations of truth and creativity. For Goethe art was, Steiner writes: "one of the revelations of the primal law of the world; science was for him the other one. For him art and science sprang from one source."<sup>1</sup>

The reason for this attitude can be found looking closer at Goethe's and Steiner's approach to the phenomena of consciousness and knowledge. Neither of them take representation as the point of departure, neither for the concept of truth nor for artistic creation. Concerning his own conception of truth, Steiner puts this very clear in the introduction to *Truth and Knowledge*:

The outcome of what follows is that truth is not, as is usually assumed, an ideal reflection of something real, but is a product of the human spirit, created by an activity which is free. [...] Man is not a passive onlooker in relation to evolution, merely repeating in mental pictures cosmic events taking place without his participation; he is the active co-creator of the world-process, and cognition is the most perfect link in the organism of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

We have the reason to believe that Steiner developed his conception of truth and art on the background of an effort and ability to experience and observe the creative constitutive processes of consciousness and not only the results of these processes, and that this determined his philosophical, scientific and artistic routes and the difference these took from that of his contemporaries. Truth and artistic creativity for Steiner means to create the possibility to see and experience this primordial constitutive activity, out of which representation and the consciousness of our every day life emerges.

This determines the how of both operations: What must be created is the situation of becoming where representation is no longer possible. Representation, and the conception of truth derived out of it, is necessarily a secondary state which has evolved out of a primary situation. Truth in Steiners view thus means to understand and experientially cognize this primary situation as an active co-creation of the world-process. This means that what is at first given in experience must be

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<sup>1</sup> *From Art to Science* quoted from [http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA001/English/MP1988/GA001\\_c08.html](http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA001/English/MP1988/GA001_c08.html), 28.10.09

<sup>2</sup> *Truth and Knowledge*, quoted from [http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA003/English/GC1981/GA003\\_pref.html](http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA003/English/GC1981/GA003_pref.html), 28.10.09

decomposed to allow for the becoming-process always already at work but concealed in every experience. Philosophy and art lead to this by different routes, but both aim at creating the state of becoming prior to representation.

Philosophy leads to this becoming-process in the domain of thinking by a conceptual procedure which strives to overcome representation, and this is the primary concern of Truth and Knowledge and the whole of Steiner's epistemology. Art leads to the same in the domain of sense-perception by, in Steiner's words, a: "sinnliche Erscheinung in der Form der Idee"<sup>3</sup>. What this means might not be completely clear, but according to the Goethe scholar Henri Bortoft, idea in the sense used in the German philosophical tradition does not mean what we usually think of as idea, as something subjective in our heads, so to speak: "... an organizing idea - this is what an idea is: organizing"<sup>4</sup>. An idea should not be thought of as an entity but as an activity, and so the form which the sensible appearance is given is not as an object or representation, but as a function. In an artwork the elements of sensation are brought into play, and this play should have the form of an idea in this sense. They should, to use the formulation by Paul Klee, not render something visible, but render visible.

With this in mind we can see Steiner's definition of art as erecting a sensible aggregate of sensations which resists representation and thereby opens for the process of creating truth. An artwork is an assemblage of sensible material which by its arrangement forces one to enter a creative engagement with it so that the act of comprehension becomes an entry into the world-process. Art is therefore not about (feeling) reactions to something perceived (the domain of representations) but about the becoming put to play in an encounter. This is not something subjective or objective, but a world-process.<sup>5</sup>

In his philosophy and subsequent spiritual science Steiner develops his method for creating truth as active co-creation of the world-process, or of becoming, as I will say. In this paper I will try to shed some light on the relation between art and philosophy, and their role in relation to creating this event.

This method was presented by Steiner in his writings throughout his whole life, and it is therefore extremely difficult to comprehend. The Israeli author Jesaiah Ben-Aharon has elaborated and developed this method in detail in the book *The New Experience of the Supersensible*, and I will

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<sup>3</sup> *Goethe als Vater einer neuen Ästhetik*, Rudolf Steiner, GA 271 *Kunst und Kunsterkenntnis*, Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1991, page 33.

<sup>4</sup> *The Wholeness of Nature*, Henri Bortoft, Lindisfarne Press 1996, page 128

<sup>5</sup> That this becoming involves the life of feeling is another issue. But the important here is to stress that the affective dimension is not a secondary subjective reaction to what is experienced, but part of the original cogizing activity.

now try to present an outline of the method based on this work.

The basic idea of this method can actually be presented as quite simple, although an elaboration of the philosophical and phenomenological aspects of it is extremely complex and difficult. This basic idea consist in separating thinking from any kind of given perception to such an extent that the activity of thinking is able to revolve around itself so intensely that the only thing percieved becomes this activity itself. This process, which can be found prefigured in the philosophy of Fichte, is developed within the experience of rationality, by working with understandable concepts, and is therefore not a mystical irrational experience, but one which comes to terms with the boundary of rationality itself, namley the experience of understanding, or more technically, the constitutive experience of evidence. What rationality takes for granted and can not be explained, its blind spot, becomes the place where the activity of thinking is percieved. And this perception is at the same time a self-creation and a world-process because this is the place where subjectivity and objectivity can not be discerned but are created in the first place. This is therefore the beginning of truth as active co-creation of the world process.

This event of becoming should then eventually be involved all aspects of life. This new faculty, the ability to think the pure activity of thinking itself can little by little be confronted with the experience of sense perception. When thinking is able to pour itself actively into the realm of perception without naming and fixation of objects, the event of becoming is experienced also in the realm of perception.<sup>6</sup>

In his philosophy Steiner gives the epistemological startpoint for this process as the concept of the "directly given". This is a boundary-thought which has the function of delimiting the relation between thinking and perception, and to show how the two are always already intertwined in our experience of the world. If we were able to extract thinking completely from our experience of the world we would experience the "directly given":

This "directly given" picture is what flits past us, disconnected, but undifferentiated. In it nothing appears distinguished from, related to, or determined by, anything else.<sup>7</sup>

This shows that the conceptual element is internal to our world and that it is not in any way imposed

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<sup>6</sup> This process is pictured in *The New Experience of the Supersensible*, Jesaiah Ben-Aharon, Temple Lodge, London 1995.

<sup>7</sup> *Truth and Knowledge*, Rudolf Steiner, quoted from [http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA003/English/GC1981/GA003\\_c04.html](http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA003/English/GC1981/GA003_c04.html), 28.10.09

upon something perceived, since the activity of distinguishing, relating and determining is what reveals the world in the first place, as well as the self to itself overagainst this otherness. In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, a work which can be seen as a continuation of *Truth and Knowledge*, the situation of the hypothetical purely passive condition of the ‘directly given’ is described in this way:

The world would then appear to this being as nothing but a mere disconnected aggregate of objects of sensation: colors, sounds, sensations of pressure, of warmth, of taste and smell; also feelings of pleasure and pain. This aggregate is the content of pure, unthinking observation.<sup>8</sup>

There is therefore a kind of thinking which is internal or immanent within perception, a kind of thinking embodied and enacted within the different sensory mediums and their interactions, but which is totally unconscious since it is prior to the creation of our given every-day subjectivity. Even if this is not the same as what we usually call thinking, the activity inherent in our ordinary thinking has its origin in this primordial activity which brings forth the world and subjectivity in the first place. Steiner says that there is nothing that prevents us from supposing the possibility of a form of consciousness where the concept and the perception is acquired simultaneously, ie. where there is no division between thinking and perception, but that the specific human organization of our age functions in such a manner that they come in two; as an "outer" perceived world and "inner" thinking.<sup>9</sup>

The method of spiritual science aims at consciously creating this primordial situation where the world splits into perception and thinking and thus also creates the dualistic state of consciousness. In his book *Riddles of Soul*, he describes the way to realize this as to become

familiar with the inner process that combines psychic representation with sense-impression; so familiar that it can hold at arms length the influx of the sense-impressions themselves (or of their echoes in after-experience) into the act of representing.<sup>10</sup>

As Ben-Aharon shows in his book, this requires that the unconscious and instinctive relation between thinking and perception be deconstructed and held apart so that one is able to create “a

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<sup>8</sup> *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Rudolf Steiner, quoted from [http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA004/English/RSP1964/GA004\\_c04.html](http://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA004/English/RSP1964/GA004_c04.html) 28.10.09. This book develops the ideas presented in *Truth and Knowledge* where “the situation” of the “directly given” is first presented.

<sup>9</sup> This he relates to the (individual as well as historical) evolution of individuality and freedom.

<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Riddles of Soul*, quoted from *The New Experience of the Supersensible*, p. 17

negative and reversed, that is, an actively produced non-relation between perception and thinking.”<sup>11</sup>

This decomposition is exactly what transforms the given subjectivity and its representational mode of experience into an event of becoming. When one is able to cultivate and strengthen thinking to such an extent that this activity becomes the only perception, transforming the experience of body (as "inner" perception) during the process, one can according to Ben-Aharon apply this ability within the field of sense-perception and thereby enter the world in its living becoming, before it is converted into representations, before it is "killed". In the methodical introductory chapter to *The New Experience of the Supersensible* this is pictured as a process where perception and thinking are transformed anew into each other and together create a new faculty of cognition. The passage, which is worth reading carefully, goes as follows:

Instead of letting thinking and sense-perception devitalize each other in the forming of the brain-and-sense-bound mental picture, we let them flow freely through each other and be reversed into each other. Living thought thus reaches to the living origin of sense-perception, and pure sense-perception reaches as far as the original source of thinking. Beyond their midway cross point they are both gradually reversed into each other, at once keeping, transforming and giving up their original identity in the reversal process inside each other's opposite stream. When thinking grasps the origin of perception it becomes, as thought, perception, and when perception penetrates to the source of thinking it becomes, as perception, thinking. In this living, mutual exchange of thinking in and through perception, and perception in and through thinking, thinking is perceived through living sense-perception, and sense-perception is thought through living thinking.<sup>12</sup>

In a lecture held in Colmar, France<sup>13</sup>, Ben-Aharon discusses the future role of philosophy as presented by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *What Is Philosophy?* In this book they express it as "The sole purpose of philosophy is to be worthy of the event". This can be directly related to the process and method sketched above. But now we can ask; if philosophy and thinking in the future is moving away from representation and interpretation and towards "the becoming of the event and the event of becoming"<sup>14</sup>, how can we regard the role of the artistic enterprise in relation to this?

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<sup>11</sup> *The New Experience of the Supersensible*, p. 17

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 21

<sup>13</sup> *Anthroposophy and post-modern Philosophy in Dialogue Observations on the Spiritualization of Thinking*, Lecture by Jesaiah Ben-Aharon, Colmar France, June 1., 2007

<sup>14</sup> *The Event and the Other*, Lecture in Oslo, posted at <http://www.ybaschool.co.il/eng/norway.htm>, 28.10.09

In the introduction to the book *Francis Bacon The Logic of Sensation* by Gilles Deleuze Daniel Smith says that

Modern art and modern philosophy can be said to have converged on a similar problem: both renounced the domain of representation and instead took the conditions of representation as their object.<sup>15</sup>

This statement is highly interesting in relation to Steiner's conception of truth. As we have seen, truth conceived by Steiner is exactly not "a true representation" but, by experiencing the formative process of representing (i.e. the conditions of representation), the ability to resist and thereby transform representation and consciously enter the stream of becoming before it is converted into our ordinary world of subjective and objective states. If, as Smith says, art has converged with philosophy on this problem it means that it strives for the same realization, only within a different domain.

The conditions of representation and the effort to go beyond them, is, as Smith says, a central part of Deleuze's philosophy. In his work on art he studies this from the perspective of the "logic of sensation". This means that he tries to explicate the concept of how a work of art engenders becoming. On this point we can find a very interesting correlation between Steiner's internal relation between aesthetics and his image of thought as presented through the concept of the directly given, and the internal relation of these enterprises within Deleuze's thinking. To clarify to what extent this correlation is real is a huge task, but here I want to try to open for a first possible discussion of this correlation.

An interesting place to start this is to look at some of the background of Deleuze's theory of sensation. Deleuze, referring to Plato, contrasts two fundamentally different types of sensations. In opposition to those sensations that can be termed recognitions, and which correspond to a certain image of thought, he puts the kind of sensations that are "no longer objects of recognition, but objects of a fundamental encounter."<sup>16</sup> Sensations that are recognitions are the same as what we call perceptions. They are formed in harmony with the other faculties of the mind and give us the stable mental life of "common sense". However, these perceptions are a secondary rational organization of

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15 «Deleuze on Bacon: Three Conceptual Trajectories in The Logic of Sensation», Daniel W. Smith, in *Francis Bacon The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze, University of Minnesota Press, 2003

16 «Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality» by Daniel W. Smith, in *Deleuze, A Critical Reader*, Paul Patton, Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1996, p. 30

a primary, nonrational dimension of sensation. This distinction and the notion of sensation used by Deleuze originally comes from the phenomenological tradition. A well known example which highlights this distinction is the experiences of congenitally blind people who were given sight after the operation to remove cataracts was developed.<sup>17</sup>

Initially such patients were afflicted by a painful chaos of forms and colors, a gaudy confusion of visual sensations within which they could distinguish neither shapes nor space. They would acquire a perception of the world only after an often-painful process of learning and apprenticeship, during which they developed the schemata and “Gestalten” capable of providing this prereflective sense experience with the coordinates familiar to ordinary perception.<sup>18</sup>

This forms the background for Deleuze's theory of sensation, and it is interesting to note that the description of the ‘directly given’ picture which Steiner gives as a boundary thought delimits a similar cognitive situation as the one reported by the patients. I think this points to a common trait in the work of Steiner and Deleuze, namely the occupation with the pre-conscious organizing activity within perceptual recognition, and the effort to understand and experience human consciousness and the world as it is composed by practically "deconstructing experience" so to speak. Thereby they both reveal a more fundamental level of our thinking capacity and of our being as a composite of sensation, at least if we take their work to be what they both claim it to be: empiricism, or more precisely, a higher empiricism. And here they both regard art as an experimental approach to this existential domain of experience.

"One can think of the whole of Deleuze's later work as an effort to define a logic of thought that would be embodied in sensory relations" Reidar Due says<sup>19</sup>. And for Deleuze this embodied thinking he calls a "thinking in terms of affects and percepts" and is what makes out the artistic activity. Due writes that Deleuze:

conceives art as thought embodied in a sensory medium and sees philosophy as a practice of formal construction analogues to art. Deleuze thereby seeks to define the medium of thought independently of how thought is experienced, by seeing thought as the tracing of relations within an abstract sensory space.<sup>20</sup>

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17 These are documented in the book *Space and Sight* by Marius von Senden, London Methuen, 1960

18 See note 15

19 *Deleuze*, Reidar Due, page 154, Polity Press 2007

20 *Ibid*, page 154

Thus, for Deleuze the work of art is not an object, but thought materialized as sensations; it is "a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects" he and Guattari say in *What is philosophy?*<sup>21</sup>17. In his philosophy he conceives of art as a practice which can draw us into the pre-subjective becoming which is concealed by our subject-object consciousness, and he sees modern art precisely as the attempt to leave the domain of representation and reach the situation of becoming. This happens when our ordinary perception is destabilized and loses its ground, so to speak, so that we begin to actively trace the relations within the sensory plane, as Due formulates it. We then stop the simple registration of objects which characterizes the mode of representation, and are forced to actively think inside the sensory medium. This procedure he studies in his work on art and calls it to introduce "difference" into sensation in order to discover "syntheses prior to the identities of figure and perception"<sup>22</sup>18. For these syntheses there exists no pre-established order to identify with, no known figures or perceptions, and this is the fact why it forces us to leap into the unknown zones of becomings, which always are at the edge of chaos.<sup>23</sup>

Art is constituted by this second type of sensation which are "a fundamental encounter", or rather it composes with them. In this way the artist thinks in terms of affects and percepts, and this can be understood in terms of a play of sensations which reveals not primarily a recognizable object, but this play itself, and thereby the "force" or "being of sensation".

It is in this way that art can be said to be "a sort of great laboratory for a higher empiricism"<sup>24</sup>. Art can thus be a starting point for an empiricism of the forces of the real world, as opposed to what is generally taken to be empiricism, which Deleuze calls "empirical representation" and which operates inside our ordinary consciousness of representation. Accordingly he writes in Francis Bacon *The Logic of Sensation* that

there is a community of the arts, a common problem. In art, and in painting as in music, it is

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21 *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze/Guattari, Columbia University Press, 1994, page 164

22 This is discussed by John Racjmann in *Pure Immanence, Essays on a Life*, Gilles Deleuze, Zone Books, New York 2001, page 15

23 Here I will limit myself to this preliminary level of the theory of sensation, but it would be a highly interesting path to pursue it into the concepts of force and intensity and «the immanent non-organic life of things», all concepts which occur frequently in Deleuze's writings. Here we might find a correspondence to Steiner's concept of the etheric, at least it seems that Ben-Aharon suggest this in his Colmar lecture (see note 13). When Deleuze says that art is a higher empiricism, a transcendental science of the sensible, it could look like there is correspondence between Steiner's method and this higher empiricism. In any case I think we should take it seriously that Deleuze calls himself an empiricist, and that he conceives this outside what we usually take to be empiricism which he calls empirical representation. On this background concepts like "immanent non-organic life of things" are highly interesting, and I believe should be taken not a literary creations, but precise concepts derived out of experience.

24 *Pure Immanence, Essays on A Life*, page 15

not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. [...] How will sensation be able to sufficiently turn in on itself, relax or contract itself, so as to capture these nongiven forces in what it gives us, to make us sense these insensible forces, and raise itself to its own conditions?<sup>25</sup>

This higher empiricism of Deleuze I believe can be compared to the method of spiritual science which Steiner presents. As Steiner says, in order cognize the immanent spiritual nature of the world in a consciousness prior to representation “the soul must be familiar with the inner process that combines psychic representation with sense-impression; so familiar that it can hold at arms length the influx of the sense-impressions themselves (or of their echoes in after-experience) into the act of representing.”<sup>26</sup> I believe this characterizes the same cognitive situation as Deleuze delimits when he writes that art is a bloc of percepts and affects which creates the conditions for discovering syntheses prior to the identities of figure and perception.

The conception of art which Deleuze presents has therefore many similarities with that of Steiner's "sinnliche Erscheinung in der Form der Idee". Both see art as something which forces us to realize a different kind of thinking embodied within a sensory medium, and which therefore can take us towards a transformation where, as Ben-Aharon says, perception and thinking are transformed into each other; "thinking is perceived through living sense-perception, and sense-perception is thought through living thinking"<sup>27</sup> so that both the world, our self and the border between them are mutually transformed into a new becoming.<sup>28</sup>

It is important that Deleuze developed much of his philosophy and of course especially the philosophy of art by engaging with contemporary works of art. His thinking may therefore be seen as an explication of the development within twentieth Century art. And I think that if we now compare the tendencies in the development of 20th Century art to the above, we can trace a development towards the realization of the event of becoming which runs through Deleuze's writings and which is also the goal of the spiritual science of Steiner.

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25 *Francis Bacon The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze, Continuum Books, New York 2005, page 40

26 See note 10

27 See note 12

28 Compare for example with this passage from *The New Experience of the Supersensible*: "At this moment of crossing the threshold of sense-perception a most beautiful and immensely rewarding experience takes hold of us. Human perceiving consciousness becomes light, gently radiating and circulating, weaving - and that is the unusual impression - inside and around, the centre and circumference of what was the object. It merges with the expanded essence of the object that was formerly only thought, but now is experienced in living light. But now also the eye becomes an 'object' of perception for an expanded, new eye. The eye is experienced detached, separated from the body, and it swims on the rays of its own light into the living, light-pulsating space of the object, becoming its eye of etheric appearance, serving its unfolding being." *The New Experience of the Supersensible*, p. 91

From the point of view of representation, clearly there has taken place a gradual process of deconstruction or decomposition of form during this Century. Most obvious we can see this in the visual arts, but a similar process can be found in literature, in music, and in all other forms of expression. Modern art is in general more concerned with the elements of figures and perceptions, then with the repertoire of figures and representations and the laws inherited from the tradition (tonality in music for example). From the point of view of recognition and representation we gradually draw towards chaos.

We can therefore say that by this development we have reached a state of affairs within the artistic situation of our time which resembles and converges with the boundary thought-experience. Both this epistemological situation and the artistic situation point at the act of formalization which works out the structural dispositions within sensible experience. The French philosopher Alain Badiou says accordingly: "an artistic situation, in general, is always something like relation between a chaotic disposition of sensibility in general (what is in the physical, what is in the audible, and in general) and what is a form."<sup>29</sup> and another place: "the sense of form which belongs to the 20th century, sees form as what the artistic act authorizes by way of new thinking. Form is therefore an Idea as given in its material index, a singularity that can only be activated in the real grip of an act."<sup>30</sup>

This means that, as Steiner also said about Goethe's conception, art is an operation of truth. Art in this sense becomes an endeavour of knowledge and cognition, but this is of course not common-sense understanding of knowledge as information or judgement, but of the experience of the process of cognition. Truth not as representation, but truth concerned with the conditions of representation as event: "...what is an artistic event? ...generally speaking, an artistic event, a real artistic event is a change in the formula of the world....it's a new current in the chaotic sensibility. It's a new disposition of the immanent relation between chaotic sensibility and formalization."<sup>31</sup>

What can be said about the reason and motivation for all this? As Daniel Smith points out in the already quoted passage from the introduction to *Francis Bacon: Modern art and modern philosophy* can be said to have converged on a similar problem: both renounced the domain of representation and instead took the conditions of representation as their object. As I have tried to show, these conditions are the conditions of a specific form of consciousness, and the artistic development may therefore be regarded as sign of a change or evolution at work in the general consciousness of

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29 *The Subject of Art*, Alain Badiou, quoted from [http://www.lacan.com/symptom6\\_articles/badiou.html](http://www.lacan.com/symptom6_articles/badiou.html), 28.10.09

30 *The Century*, Alain Badiou, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007, page 159

31 See note 29

humanity and the work of Steiner and Deleuze as attempts to follow and grasp this evolution; an evolution towards the event of becoming, or as Steiner would say, towards man as the active co-creator of the world-process.