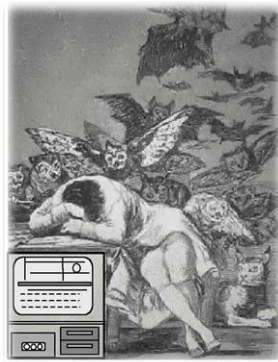


Yuri Tarnopolsky



Essays à la Montaigne



2001-2016

Essay 60. Art and Nexistence

Essays 1 to 59 (2001-2013):

<http://spirospero.net/simplicity.html> (contents and links to single Essays)

<http://spirospero.net/essays-complete.pdf> (Essays 1 to 56)

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/11607864/Essays-Part-1> (Essays 1 to 20)

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/12273800/Essays-Part-2> (Essays 21 to 40)

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/12529842/Essays-Part-3> (Essays 41 to 56)

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/17164855/Essays-a-la-Montaigne-complete> (pdf, Essays 1 to 56)

Last Essays

[Essay 57. THE FEW AND THE MANY](#) , html (pdf)

[Essay 58. Pattern chemistry of rationality](#) (pdf)

[Essay 59. The Knot: Humans, Ideas, Things and Evolution of Ecosphere](#) (pdf)

About the author: [Memoirs of 1984](#) (<http://spirospero.net/1984.pdf>) . Website: spirospero.net

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Yuri Tarnopolsky

ESSAY 60. ART AND NEXISTENCE

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2016

Demain n'existe pas

Tomorrow does not exist

Lara Fabian

1. ART AS ART

Essay 60 follows **Essay 59**, *The Knot: Humans, Ideas, Things and Evolution of Ecosphere* and completes my [Essays](#). It is neither a source for art education nor art criticism. Intended as an illustration of pattern ideas, it is a selection of my subjective, biased, and fragmentary observations of a tiny part of modern visual art, taken from different, distant, and sometimes odd points. It should not be perceived as anything but an expression of my curiosity, personal taste, and opinion.

I tried to approach art in Essays 20, *On Artificial Art* and 39, *Painting the Ice Cream Soup*. In the latter, I wrote: “Irrationality is a precious gift of the artist and this is why art is a big mystery for the rational mind.” I could not get half the mystery off my half-rational mind, however, and this is my concluding attempt to reconcile both halves.

I mean here by art, unless specified otherwise, the modern and, especially, postmodern visual art. My intent comes from my belief in prophetic abilities of arts. I am trying to understand what art is trying to tell me about the future in the language of shrieks, whimpers, and bizarre gestures for which we do not yet have appropriate words because words emerge from the past.

In my own private systematics, I divide all Western art history into four overlapping periods:

1. Ancient Art, including cave art.
2. Classical figurative art from the Middle Ages to its retirement after Haussmann’s renovation of Paris, progress of communication and transportation, and decline of European aristocracy. Its maturity was shaped by Italian Renaissance. Experiments and mutations were always rocking the Classical Boat but not as wildly as to capsize it.

3. Art of the 20th century. It jumped out of the French Boat hit too hard by European wars and revolutions, industrial and otherwise. Wassily Kandinsky was its feisty ideologue, major contributor, and the First Prophet. His writings, among them *Point and Line to Plane* and *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, attacked “conventional beauty” with the zeal of an ascetic preacher cursing carnal sins.

4. Art market of the post-WW2 revival and the Age of Affluence in the West. Andy Warhol, the Second Prophet, left his unambiguous Analects (*The [Philosophy of Andy Warhol](#)*) that erased from the definition of art everything but money.

The two last periods, especially, the Third Millennium, comprise what I mean in this Essay by art. Of course, its roots grew in the two previous ones. The cave art of France could be taken for postmodern art if discovered in a basement of a deceased reclusive artist.

Modern art, like modern culture in general, is fundamentally experimental. The words *fundamental* and *experimental* make an uneasy couple, however. Experiment in science is supposed to make foundations stronger and expand them. Perpetual experiment in art reduces the foundation to the simplest rules of the game, unchanged since the Second Prophet. Yet it is the spirit of the game that makes culture such fun. As for science, it has its own fun and beauty, but there is a huge difference: art is the body of all art ever created, while science is its own perpetually sharpened cutting edge, like the smile of the Cheshire Cat over the receding body.

Art in this Essay is the art of the headlines, multimillion sales, scandalous exhibits, world fame, and delirious or baffled reviews. This is a small part of the whole Art. There is also the huge but invisible, unless you run into it like into an iceberg, the underwater art of small galleries, local artists, art fairs, festivals, flea markets, garage sales, affordable internet sales, and “commodity art” that can be ordered online by your specifications or instructed to do-it-yourself like a true abstract expressionist. The daylight of attention and memory still reaches the surface layer of Whole Art where the most significant interesting original artists, alive and departed, rest among empty dollar hooks and where I had from time to time the treasured feeling of life that was radiating warmth into my face.

The underwater art represents the entire history of art, its daily content, purpose, and function on the wall or a floor of human edifice, as value, status symbol, and decoration. It supports the presence of art in the cultural atmosphere of the nation and not just in its elite chambers. It is not represented here for the reason of its big size and underwater location, from which it watches attentively, jealously, but skeptically the events above.

NOTE. In this Essays, using almost exclusively Internet sources, I looked for images with appropriate license for my post-stamp size illustrations. In its absence, I am relying on the principle of fair use and loss of detail in small images. The images play the role of buttons leading to original sites. Some well-known art is truly generic on the Web. In any case, the name of an artist alone is sufficient to conjure, with Google, his or her entire artistic heritage, as well as life and foibles.

Figure 1.1 shows a few artworks with the same unambiguous figurative content: horse (see also [Horses in Art](#)). To me they symbolize the eternity and unity of art,¹ which, as a true time machine, never forgets its past stored as material artifacts and not just verbal ruminations. With Google, the storage is searchable, but you need to know what you are looking for. The Web is full of dark corners with art surprises.

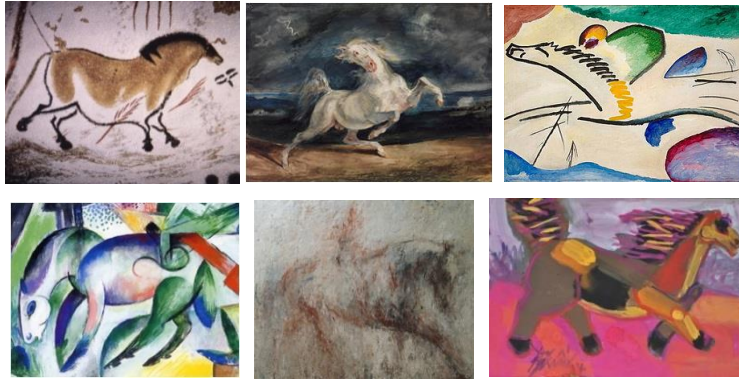


Figure 1.1. Horses.

Top: A horse from Lascaux cave, ca.15000 B.C.; Eugène Delacroix, [Horse Frightened by Lightning](#), 1829; Wassily Kandinsky, [Rider](#) 1911. **Bottom:** Heinrich Campendonk, [Horse by the Lake](#) (detail), 1915; [Judy Buxton, Grey Horse](#), ca. 2000; Do Phan (Đỗ Phấn), [Horse](#), 2014.

While classical painting was well represented in Russian museums, the “bourgeois modernist” art was repressed in my Soviet time. It could be seen only through some cracks in the boarded up Russian windows on the world. Nevertheless, I was loosely familiar with its main directions and they failed to excite me. I had missed the striking evolution of art during the last 50 years and its turning into an economic phenomenon. In America, only the Internet gave me access to true modernity, which looked anything but “bourgeois.” I have been immersed into Web art for the last three years. I am still making discoveries, like [Richard Pousette-Dart](#) (1916 – 1992) and Alfonso Ossorio (1916 – 1990), but it is difficult to surprise me.

Arts, especially music and poetry, have been as much my spiritual oxygen as chemistry and science. Classical music was the first arts wave that rolled over my head very early, in high school. It was more accessible than any other art in Russia. Poetry was the second, although the best of it was for a long time forbidden and later hard to find. I never missed a chance to visit art museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), but the absolute majority of my impressions were from reproductions.

The Web, planted with tollbooths on the highways to movies, music, and literature, leaves images free to look at, as a kind of billboards along the roads. Of course, it is not the same as art face to face, but one can get some idea. Anyway, I do not pretend being a connoisseur of art.

With all its exclusivity, visual arts—painting, sculpture, installation, and performance—are more accessible on the Web than other arts, although as an undersized, flattened, and often miscolored surrogate, with no assurance of reality like the smell and sound of a museum, gallery, or even a city square. The digital images, nevertheless, carry much more content than the shadows in the Plato’s cave. Besides, although many modern originals lose very little on the screen, which reveals something unflattering about them, the size is always the irreplaceable loss on the Web.

¹ I wonder if anybody asked the question why the animals in cave pictures are realistic while human are schematic. If no one did, I do. As for horse, can anybody see it as prophetic hybrid of life and machine? I can.

The Venice Biennale of 2013 and Sara Sze's exhibition *Triple Point* there suddenly opened to



Deep Space (photo by Robert Franke)

me a deep space of which I had been largely ignorant and dismissive. Irritated and prejudiced, I entered the halls of fame and infamy of modern art and I am now leaving them, impressed, almost reconciled, and definitely grateful. My reason took a good refreshing rest in this odd niche of our civilization. To lose it would make our life much poorer, like the sky robbed of the Milky Way by city lights. I never saw the Milky Way in America or anywhere else except in the sky over a completely dark Ukrainian village of my college years.

Art opened to me a view of the whole spectrum of pattern concepts and themes addressed in these Essays. Now, saturated with impressions, I am anxious to look behind visible horizons at what can never be seen, touched, and posted on the Web and yet is in highest demand, especially, as long as it either looks and smells good or just gives you goose bumps and makes you panic. It is the future, the epitome of ultimate and unquestionable **nexistence**. Tomorrow does not exist. And yet it does.

I want to use art as a *pattern window*, unobstructed by technology, into the future of the *Knot* of **Essay 59**, i.e., the future of all of us: humans, ideas, Things,² our pets, toys, and fetishes, our masters, slaves, friends, enemies, buttons, icons, shortcuts, accounts, and whatever else might spring up in the man-made ecosphere of the Third Millennium, A.D.

One of my first discoveries was Barnett Newman.

A large painting of a vertical white line on a blue background, *Onement VI* by Barnett Newman looks like a window with curtains drawn together. Having in mind that the painting was sold in 2013 for \$43.8 million at Sotheby's, New York, what could we see with the curtains parted? Is



Barnett Newman (1905-1970),
Onement VI (1953; 102 x 120") and its
counter-abstraction (concretization?).

there anything behind? What if there is something non-existing, which is neither something nor nothing: **nexistence**, as I will further call it? I use this contraction of **non-existence** for anything that cannot be perceived by human senses, may not make any logical sense, yet is a source of either debate or agreement, or influence on earthly matters, with a great real power, or even being a cause of war.

I see the world as patterns³: similarity airways between distant continents and worlds. One of them connects *Onement VI* with a photo of a curtained window. In this case, a **similarity** can be recognized by most observers. I am interested in what is not visible to eye, however, and, especially, cannot be sensed in principle, even with most sophisticated technology.

² I capitalize man-made Things as an evolutionary domain, on par with humans and ideas; see **Essay 59**. To capitalize also humans and ideas would probably make more sense, but they do not evolve as fast as Things.

³ Patterns are typically regarded as stable regularities. Pattern Theory of Ulf Grenander and my chemical background guides me to the intimate mechanisms of pattern instability and change typical for human history and individual human situations. See [Introduction to Pattern Chemistry](#).

I am intrigued and excited by what does not exist at all yet exerts force like some physical field, shaping the present and the silhouette of the future. I want to understand it. What can we see through the slit in the Newman's curtain? I will come back to it in the end. Meanwhile, I am using an opportunity to present more of Barnett Newman, **Figure 1.2**. See also his [Stations of the Cross](#). Much more can be found on the Web, for example, Christie's [lot notes](#) accompanying *Black Fire*.

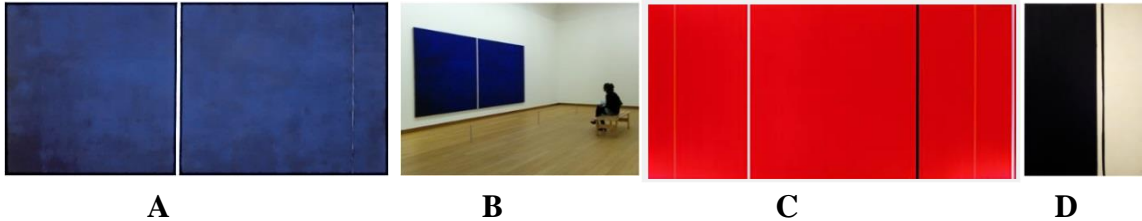


Figure 1.2. Barnett Newman (1905-1970): A, B: *Cathedra* (1951), sold for \$12 million in 1997, **C: *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1951); D: *Black Fire* (1963)**, \$84.2 million in 2013.

B: Photo by Autopilot, from Wikipedia.

Modern visual art is, probably, the only man-made object on earth that can be taken entirely by its face value. What is art? Is *Onement VI* art or wall painting?

“What is art?” This has been a simple question if limited to classical art. With modern art, which accompanied, somewhat trailing behind but looking far ahead, the emergence of modern industrial civilization, it is not so simple. The already *post-post*-industrial civilization is on its way but it has not yet arrived. It is like a mathematical expression with the opening bracket (but no closing one. If we trust sci-fi prophets (I do), it will be appropriate to call it post-human. And if we trust modern art as prophesy, we are coming to the same conclusion, watching the shrinking presence of life, human body, passions of the soul, and surrounding nature in modern art.

A regular commercial urinal, a pile of rocks or pieces of bread, dead animal, industrially made and bent gigantic sheet of steel, a canvas chaotically splashed or evenly covered by a paint of single color ([monochrome](#)), an unmade and untidy bed—is all that art?

Art is more than what you **believe** it is. My position regarding art as a whole is: everything that is called, presented, exhibited, advertised, handled, sold and bought, as well as forged, stolen, and destroyed as art is art. I will repeat this mantra, with a few variations, more than once in this Essay.

There is no art but art and to make art is an art in itself. But why is this art so different from the so-called classical art of all centuries before the twentieth one? What does this pattern of transition mean for the entire domain of human exsystem? Does the all-you-can-eat art buffet symbolize some radical unique turn of history? Can anything like that happen in social life (the loss of Federal Powers over the disUnited States of America) or science (synthetic life that, as Craig Venter promised, can create life forms without a preceding evolutionary history⁴)?

⁴ [“Synthetic biology frees the design of life from the shackles of evolution”](#)

Reviews of modern art exhibitions or particular works, whether landmarks or new and obscure ones, are often written tong-in-cheek. One can clearly see the critic's bewilderment and vacillation between masked mockery and forced dutiful praise. Yet the apparent duplicity is not necessarily cynical. I can understand that perception of art even by a seasoned professional strongly depends on the viewer's mood, state of mind, personal memories, and even the weather outside. For a common viewer, the artwork seen for the first time is the best approximation of an accidental exchange of looks that could start a personal relationship after mutual ground testing.

There is no generic definition of art the way we define bread or bicycle because there are no limits to the variety of the tangible stuff of modern art. The world of art is huge but insular. It is the strangest domain of economy, an industry in which to produce more may mean actually to produce less: a unique object in a single copy for a narrowest segment of consumers, often, made with minimal labor, hired labor, or no labor at all. It is the kind of work where to be innovative is to repeat the same pattern, with some predictable variations (like the size of the iPhone?). Art is where speaking about art means composing phrases that have dozen possible meanings or no meaning at all. Is it the multi-speak, the descendant of doublespeak? Squeak-speak? Shriek-speak?

Like an astrophysicist, observing the stars and planets in deep space, hopes to trace the origin and the future of our solar system and planet Earth in it, I believe that art can tell us something about where we are and where we are all going as civilization. I believe in the prophetic power of art because art tells us, in a kind of sign language, our future before we can even invent words to describe something new and never seen and heard. As for "traditional beauty," it is abound in the lower tiers of the art world and some of it, not much, seeps up to the top.

"Art is what you believe it is" or "what is sells as art" or "art is nexistence" cannot satisfy anybody whose professional habit is to ask meaningful questions and answer them in a non-circular way. Art has monetary value and seems to be made of matter, which sounds like it is brimming with existence. Next, I am going to look at art from those two angles.

2. ART AS MATTER

So, here we go again. Repeat after me: art is what is made, called, exhibited, and sold as art even if somebody says it is not art.

Is that so? If that is true, art is as much a matter of belief as a matter of matter. “A matter of...” is a figure of speech, but belief is not about matter. Doubt is the signaling smell of belief, its pheromone. If the believer stands firmly by his faith, then he will doubt your beliefs and, occasionally, his own. Yet the palpable and measurable physicality of art is unmistakably and unconditionally there. It is a thing like any other and it does not need any belief to assert its existence. Why is it so difficult to define art in a non-circular way? Moreover, it is difficult to speak about art as we speak about bread, stone, money, and the fabric of everyday life, even though all that can be the stuff of art.

Modern art reveals to public in the ornate and gilded Klimtesque attire of *artspeak*. Here is a small taster of its vocabulary:



Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss* (1909). [From Wikipedia](#)

Abstraction, aesthetics, aggression, allusion, ambivalence, awareness, beauty, challenge, concept, context, controversy, creativity, declaration, depth, efflorescent, elemental, elusive, elucidatory, emotion, energy, exaltation, existential, expressive, ferocious, gestural, glyphic, harmony, humanism, imagination, individualism, innovation, inspiration, intensity, interpretation, invocation, irony, libidinal, meaning, motivation, muscular, mystery, mythological, melancholy, noble, palimpsest, poetic, pivotal, projection, purity, reference, rejection, scatological, signature, somatic, space, speculation, spontaneity, subjectivism, sublime, sumptuous, symbol, syncretic, syntax, talent, taut, texture, visceral...etc.; “dwelling on the threshold,” “silent space between and around words,” “mobilization of the space between reading and seeing,” “bondage to form,” “bounteous exchange,” “brutally human,” and more.

The most primitive, crudest, and offensive piece of modern art can still be presented and analyzed in *artspeak*. *Mea culpa*, I fall into *myspeak*, which is no better.

Rarely can we find something that contrasts with artspeak as much as this quote from a fiction book about art:

“...on the one hand fun, sex, kitsch, innocence; on the other trash, death, cynicism.”⁵

I realize that almost any review of art, music, and book is a balancing act for the professional critic. I rarely read art books and reviews, except in *The New Yorker*, where nobody wants to be hurt by falling off the high wire. Yet Sarah L. Thornton’s book *Seven days in the art world* (2009) lets you sneak into modern art world through the back door. In her later book *33 artists in 3 acts* (2014), she sets the matter straight from the start: “Artists don’t just make art. They create and preserve myths that give their work clout” (page XIII).

I have noticed two outstanding art reporters: Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian* (UK), and Sebastian Smee, *The Boston Globe*. I now suspect that artspeak has a range of dialects, some of them intelligent, serious, and delightfully ambiguous. Reviews of Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker* can offer the artist a Greek gift with stratospherically higher artistry than their targets.⁶

Art, however, is not what anybody says about it. Art appears to a viewer as honest man-made and often defiantly raw matter. By physical materiality I do not mean the properties of the medium of artwork which today varies from excrement to gemstones, from brick to bread, and from cadaver to live flesh. I mean that, whatever we all say or hesitate to say about a piece of art, it is a **thing** that takes space, has mass, can move or be moved, reflects or emits light, smells, sounds, and can be licked to taste it. Moreover, this thing, like you and I, is not made in thousands of copies and, strictly speaking, cannot be considered Thing: a loop of the Knot ([Essay 59](#)), on par with humans and ideas. It is unique by definition, although it can have twins, clones (prints), close variations, and imitations. Modern art grows in big and supportive incest-ridden families, but not without divorces and remarriages.

No electronic microscope can find any harmony or melancholy in the cracks of paint. You can be invited to put an artificial paper-on-aluminum stone on your windowsill (Sarah Sze in Venice), walk on art and occasionally steal it (Ai Weiwei at Tate Modern), and annoy or hurt the artist (Marina Abramovic, Naples, 1974). You can put your finger on expression, harmony, and mystery, but only metaphorically. The X-rays and electron microscope may help with suspected forgery but are mum on the poetic, romantic, and libidinal.

Paintings, sculpture, and installations can be seen, touched, weighed, measured, appraised, mangled, and kept under lock. In market economy, art is tangible investment: something you can lay a hand on, literally, not metaphorically. Tyrannical regimes, religions, and ideologues can proclaim art subversive and ban or destroy it, even together with the artist. Yet art could replicate and spread because artists borrow from each other, paying back in the currency of fame.

⁵ Michel Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, Knopf, 2012, p. 129.

⁶ “When I think of Richard Serra’s work as art, or of art as what Richard Serra does, a bracing bleakness descends, like that of a stern northern region, where people live gladly, while under no illusion that it’s the isle of Capri.” Peter Schjeldahl, *Industrial Strength*, *The New Yorker*, 2007/06/11, p. 146

Originality is power, but so is similitude. Photography, initially the threat and then the blessing of visual art, combines both and turns one into the other.

Performance art is witnessed and recorded on films and digital media. Reproductions are more like reductions, but they make art available to those who, like me, are far from museums and galleries.

Art is as different as framed squiggles and splashes of paint, rusty sheets and rods of steel, heaps of refuse, pointless human labor, sleep before an audience, countless paintings of apples, lilies, parallel lines, and color blots. The heart-squeezing Rembrandts, monsters of Goya, self-mutilations of Francis Bacon, Raphael's *Madonnas*—all those things are art. As we have no choice but to accept all the gore, greed, glut, and glory of human history, we have to accept art as art whether we like it or not because it **is** history. It is the future that we can squabble about.

Obviously, I dislike a lot of art. Modern art, which I am trying to understand, forces me to look at myself and try to uncover the reason of my apprehension. My habit of a chemist to ask the childish question “what is it made of?” could be part of the problem. I need to look at the backside of everything and take things apart down to atoms.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the physicality of art.



Figure 2.1. Art as thing. Left to right: Michelangelo, *David*, front and back; Van Gogh, *Bedroom*, front and back; Richard Serra, *Fulcrum* (steel); Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds* (porcelain).

Yet as money has lost its exclusive materiality so has modern art. As an image or a video from a digital file, even the purebred material art becomes less material—or sometimes more so when it involves live matter, as performance art does. Modern art can be made of anything, including nothing, and the borders between something and something else dissolve in modern art as in a dream.

Modern painting uses a lot of historically new stuff, like anything that can stick or be glued to any vertical surface, from elephant dung (Chris Ofili) to gunpowder (Cai Guo-Qiang). “Anything” says it all. Thus, Mark Quinn (UK) has been making realistic sculptures of his own head from his frozen blood.

In addition to “anything,” modern art has added a whole spatial dimension with the genre of installation, which is the same “anything” but in 3D space. The fourth dimension—time—is put to work in mobile sculpture and variations on the theme of flowing liquid. I think that metabolic life can be considered the fifth dimension of art, as it is in theater and circus.

Cai Guo-Qiang created an [installation](#) so awesome that I am out of both artspeak and myspeak (Google: **Cai Guo-Qiang Head On**). This could be a case for silence in talking about art.



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Head On*. Photo: Tony Hisgett, Flickr.

But I can't shut up. I ask myself: Are the wolves "we" or "they?" Are the wolves made of sheepskins or dog skins? Do they hint to "a wolf in sheep's clothing?" Does the glass wall allude to the Great Wall of China or the wall of censorship (you still can make it transparent)? I like art that prompts questions other than "is it art?" and stimulates my brain. It is the practicality of an engineer.

I mention *Head On* here because, being completely immobile, it manages to unroll in space and time. The probable trajectories of each of the 99 wolves can be traced [from the next room to the glass wall](#).

There is also a one-dimensional art of geographical and, therefore, time-consuming magnitude. The *Running Fence* of Christo and Jeanne-Claude runs on the spot for almost 25 miles across hills, ravines, and roads from Northwest of Petaluma to Bodega Bay in California. The enormous size of this ephemeral and quickly extinct creation is counterbalanced by miniatures and the microscopic art accessible only under magnification (**Figure 2.2**).



Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Running Fence*, 25 miles. Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972-76 (Smithsonian).



[Vincent Gandia](#) (1935- 2009), [Miniature etching](#), 2" by 2" including the margins.

Figure 2.2. Size in art.

It occurs to me that installation by its very "anything goes" nature never looks as authentically abstract as point, line, or a color field in painting—the flat Mother Earth spans under all kinds of art. Installation can be regarded as a transformation of flat painting. Abstract art, which, along

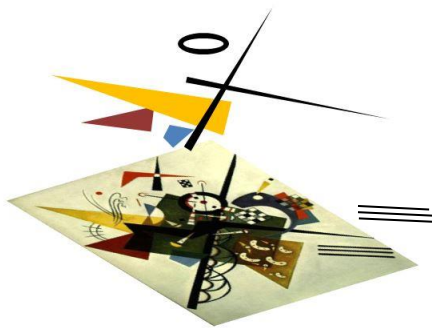


Figure 2.3. Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), *On White II* (1923) and its partly deconstructed 3D "pile" pattern.

Kandinsky, should be just "points" (fields) and lines on a plane, instinctively wants to have flesh on its thin bones.

How can everything develop from nothing and anything from something? This is the topic of the chapter ART AS TREE, but it seems appropriate to give a fully speculative illustration here.

Figure 2.3 shows one of the most famous paintings of the one of the

most famous founding fathers of abstract art: Wassily Kandinsky, *On White II*. To me it looks like a **pile** of flat abstract forms seen from above, i.e., a projection of a 3D object onto a plane. Why pile? First, the figures overlap in a sequence so that the lower ones can be seen through the semi-transparent higher ones. Second, the center of the picture has the highest density of the figures. It seems that we could take them one by one from top to bottom, as if it were a pile of cards and toothpicks. Could we turn it into installation with a 3D printer?

When I began to immerse myself in the tickling waves of modern art, I found it as much daring and innovating as dull, repetitive, and mutually imitative work.⁷ The worlds *modern*, *avant-garde*, and *experiment* for anything as old as modern art, which already is well over 100 years old, are really misleading, even if it has been made today. It is now a mature, entrenched, and conservative movement that deserves, desires, and dreads a **new**, real, full-blooded and sweeping avant-garde. This is where the future lies, prepared to jump in on us like the wolves of Cai Guo-Qian. But will the glass or (the Great Chinese) wall of money stop and scatter them, tails between their legs?

How can you create anything new in the genre of anything? I call this conundrum “the trap of anything goes.” Whatever you create is not new: it is just different version of the same.

Pile is a popular and already iconic genre of modern art. There are piles and heaps, and stacks and mounds, and piles of piles, some of them shown in **Figure 2.4**. I shun here the esteemed sub-genre of trash and poop piles.

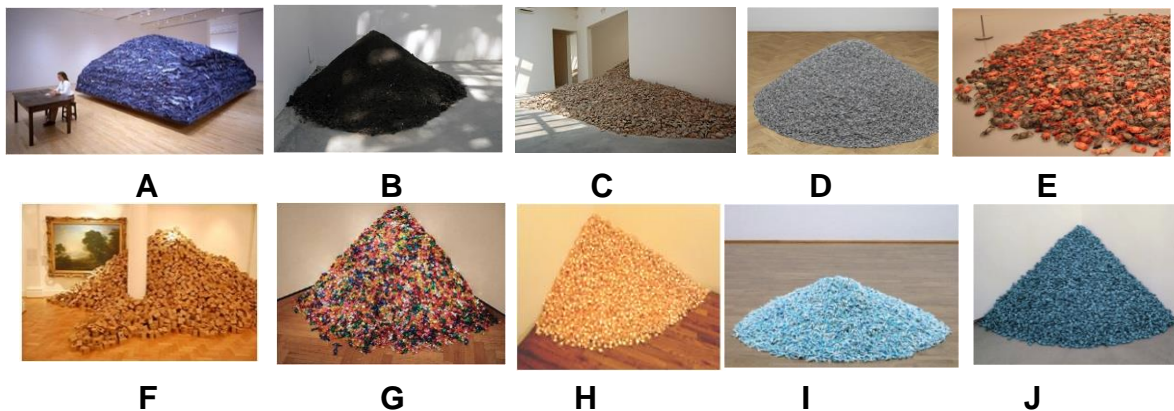


Figure 2.4. Piles. A: Old denim clothes (Ann Hamilton); B: dirt, C: gravel (Lara Almarcegui); D: porcelain sunflower seeds, E: ceramic crabs (Ai Weiwei); F: Yellow bird boxes (Carwyn Evans); G to J: Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Lover Boys*, wrapped candies displayed at four out of many different exhibitions.

Pile presents an interesting case from the point of view of complexity. If it is large by the number of components but homogenous by composition, is it complex? I classify it as simple. It can be described in a few words and made with little mental effort. If a big physical effort needed, the teamwork in art is not mortal sin.

⁷ I am sure the boredom and monotony goes up with higher rankings of the artist, but I cannot figure any objective measure for boredom. In principle, monotony can be measured as an average distance in configuration space.

I believe that complexity, mental effort, physical effort, and uniqueness (originality, inventiveness) are the main components of the artistic value. It is my personal belief, it tells something about me, not about art, and I will come to that in ART AS MIRROR. From this point of view, the lack of effort looks like the chronic anemia of modern art. The pile art form is an old hat but it is in vogue because it is both easy and respectable as new retro. I am mean, I know.

Modern outbursts of minimalism—from giant steel labyrinths to polished steel toys—try to compensate for the simplicity and monotony with oversizing and industrial technology. This explains why modern art has only a few biggest stars: the lightning in art typically comes from a loud bang, not *vice versa*, as in the nature. In the business of technology, the winner takes (almost) all.

Proclaiming the unfettered combinatorial self-expression, Kandinsky caused an incurable affliction of art. The abstract combinatorial pattern space, contrary to the promise of freedom, presents an extreme restriction. Once you (or maybe just people like myself) have seen a couple of configurations, you (at least I) have seen them all. The digits from 0 to 9 generate all possible numbers. If you saw ten digits, you saw all numbers. It is only for the mathematician working in a particular area of number theory that all numbers are different. The problem of modern art is pernicious aging,⁸ for which the best remedy is not to talk about it. Besides, in art, age is an asset.

Even though the combinations can never be exhausted, the simple principle “anything goes,” further fortified by Warhol, is becoming a totalitarian dictate.

This is something Marcel Proust anticipated, in my opinion, when he wrote:

We invariably forget that these [beauty and happiness] are individual qualities, and, mentally substituting for them a conventional type at which we arrive by striking a sort of mean among the different faces that have taken our fancy, among the pleasures we have known, we are left with mere abstract images which are lifeless and insipid because they lack precisely that element of novelty, different from anything we have known, that element which is peculiar to beauty and to happiness.

(Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, translation by Moncrieff, Kilmartin, & Enright; Modern Library, 1998, p 318)



Constraints in visual arts are never as tight as on the balance beam in gymnastics, rhymed poetry, or musical performance. Yet from the cave beginnings of art, there was a powerful constraint of likeness of the picture to its object, even if the object was a fantasy. Even a weak subconscious click of recognition connects the picture with the **viewer** who would otherwise pass it over.

⁸ As Peter Schjeldahl writes in *The New Yorker* (11/09/2015) about Frank Stella (born in 1936): “Even groundbreaking ideas have life spans”. I gratefully add to my artspeak collection *cynosure*, *apothegm*, *deathly glamour*, and *more strenuous than ecstatic* from his article. But, unlike typical artspeakers, Schjeldahl can be really critical and get to the bone, if not to the very heart.

Naturalistic likeness retains its downsized and renovated home in art. Most non-representative artists have their own constraints, too, which I would call self-similarity constraints ((Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko are stellar examples of self-similarity boredom, I am adding sacrilegiously in double parentheses)).

Marcel Proust casually noted the role of constraint in arts:

My mother was obliged to stop, but she derived from this very constraint one more delicate thought, **like good poets forced by the tyranny of rhyme to find their most beautiful lines:**

"We can talk about her again when we're by ourselves," she said softly to Swann.

Swann's Way, Translation (heavenly done) by Lydia Davis, 2003, p. 24.

"If you never tasted slavery, you never know freedom." Self-imposed constraint is masochism, but no slavery. It is mastery.

The solid constituents of pile art—soil, gravel, stones, candies, bird boxes, tiny figurines—cannot be arranged exactly the same way twice. Piles allude, unintentionally, to Heraclites' "you cannot step in the same river twice". Pile art is as much fluid as it is solid (typical artspeak, but true). Thus, bulk rice and coins are solid but conform to gravity and the shape of the container.

A pile can be just a part of a complicated scene. The pile **A** in **Figure 2.4** serves as a centerpiece of the installation [*Indigo Blue*](#) (1991, 2007) of Ann Hamilton, which I, a sceptic, like it more than I like to say. It is irresistible.

In the center of the space, a 17' x 24' steel platform was piled with 14,000 pounds of blue work clothing. Built layer by layer, the pile was formed by smoothing successive strata of pants and shirts until a volume of clothing the size of a semi-truck was formed. At the back of the space, obscured from view by the pile, an attendant sat and erased slim blue books at a table borrowed from the central market, which formerly housed one of Charleston's pre civil war slave markets. Using a Pink Pearl eraser and saliva, the books were erased back to front. The eraser waste was left to accumulate over the duration of the piece. Although the space was entered at ground level, a window accessible in the small upstairs office of the garage gave another view of the pile of work clothes and the activity at the table. One wall of the office was hung with udder-sized net bags of soybeans that sprouted and later rotted in the leakage of summer rains. With the humid weather, the space was filled with the musty smell of the damp clothes and the organic decomposition of the soybeans.

I can say why I love it: the installation is a dense complex web of associations in which Things, humans, and ideas (Knot of **Essay 59**) are bound tighter than men and serpents in *Laocoon*. It is a complex act of thought constrained by logic and links with reality.



Tobaron Waxman, *Lehem Oni. Prusa* (2006).

[Tobaron Waxman's](#) installation *Lechem Oni / Prusa*, which means "the bread of poverty, sliced" in Hebrew, is a pile of 400 glycerin soap bars. [A comment](#) says:

"Lechem oni - prusa invokes iconic Holocaust imagery with the intent of criticizing the misappropriation of the Holocaust as a means to bias mainstream

opinion. The artist makes the soap bars in the gallery, encased in each bar is a piece of hand-made matzah baked by the artist in the traditional manner in a matzah factory. The soap bars are then assembled in piles, recalling the piles of Jewish belongings and Jewish bodies discovered at concentration camps, with the soap itself an allusion to the Nazi practice of making soap from the fat of Jewish bodies.”

I, a contemporary of Holocaust, better abstain from comment. OK, I have one. Abstract art, to escape boredom, is desperately seeking some kind of anchor in real life. It can be a reference to natural scene, trendy idea, political protest, historical association, national icon, celebrity, pop merchandise, etc. It tells me about the genes of advertisement in the DNA of modern art. Abstract art needs nutrients as much as the artist does, but, asking for bread, **you** expect to get a rock. Or a candy, if you are at the right place.

Ai Weiwei’s zillions of handmade sunflower seeds, unlike his aggregations of [6000 stools](#) and [1000 bicycles](#), were presented in piles, as well as in the form of a field or, rather, shallow pond.

What did Ai Weiwei want to say with his sunflower seeds? I saw various interpretations, most under constraint of political correctness, others critical. Here is what his work tells me.



Ai Weiwei: Sunflower seeds. Left: Chinese craftsmen paint the seeds; right: Visitors trample the seeds at Tate Museum.

When I look at the photo of the field/pond of seeds opened to visitors to walk and sit on at the [Tate Gallery exhibition](#) (2010), I think about the Chinese porcelain craftsmen who for two years were paid to paint millions of seeds with a tiny brush. I perceive Ai Weiwei’s project as a mockery of human reason and work.⁹ It is my strictly personal interpretation. I do not intend to put down the artist or anybody else. This interpretation may not say

anything about the work, but, again, it says something about me. I belong to the generation of people who believed in the sacred value of human work and lived in a country where this sacred work was either symbolically paid civil duty or forced labor. This is nothing but my belief. The problem with belief is that there is **no way to find out** whether myself, the artist, and the critic really believe what we all are saying, all the more, what it means. This is what **nexistence** means, why it is not nothing, and how it moves human hands, can sustain life, and can kill.

The reason why I cringe at some modern art and wince at another does not have any objective connection with the art. It is my reaction to it. Art can be an undecipherable self-expression of the artist, to which we have no clue, artspeak or not, but it is also a self-impression of a viewer, to which nobody else has a clue, either. Modern art and modern public are playing volleyball over a brick wall, never really seeing each other. Just myspeak. More about this later, in ART AS MIRROR.

⁹ See Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, NY, 2014) on Ai Weiwei.

The piles of Lara Almarcegui do not look revolutionary in a lineup of piles, **Figure 2.4**, but neither are they as primitive. She exhibited similar piles at [Vienna Secession](#) in 2010 and in [Rotterdam](#) in 2011 and there is a story behind her work that is truly relevant and can be trusted, which is unusual in art. The piled up materials are the actual components of exhibition halls. The weights of the piles reflect the real proportions of the components. She deconstructed it somewhat similar to the way I tried to deconstruct Kandinsky's pile in **Figure 2.3**. See more about it in ART AS STONE.

From stone to its absolute opposite: life. **Figure 2.5** illustrates art made of human body, but not the body painting.



Figure 2.5. Art as living matter.

Janine Antoni, [Slumber](#) (1994). She sleeps in the gallery for 28 days while an EEG machine records her REM patterns. She then weaves them into a blanket from her night gown under which she sleeps. [Source](#).

Tilda Swinton, [The Maybe](#), 1995/2013, MoMA. Listed as: "Living artist, glass, steel, pillow, linen, water, and spectacles." [Photo by M Liao](#). [More photos](#).

[Petr Pavlensky](#), [Carcass](#), May 3, 2013. "Assistants brought him naked and wrapped in a multilayered cocoon of barbed wire to the entrance of the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg."

Although already desensitized to modern art, I lost my equanimity for a moment at the sight of the otherworldly actress Tilda Swinton (I am her visceral fan) sleeping in a glass box as a component of her installation *The Maybe* (1995 and 2013) at New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The explanatory note listed her among other material evidence: "Living artist, glass, steel, mattress, pillow, linen, water, and spectacles." The living artist, however, was absent most of the time and was supposed to appear without warning. Therefore, her **absence** was as much part of the installation as presence. As the museum staff explained, the **uncertainty** was part of the **concept** of the appropriately entitled artwork. I had a sweet tingling feeling of deep ambiguity. I instinctively felt charmed by the inventive power of art. The platitude of both idea and its realization was *post factum* evident but woman's body always adds a level of complexity to anything around it.

The Maybe was created by Tilda Swinton and Cornelia Parker. The latter also worked with stone (ART AS STONE). Cornelia Parker has, probably, the widest range of imagination and sense of material among all installation artists I know. She works with body, stone, metal, fabric, meaning of words, and pure nexistence in the form of physical absence! I, entranced, surrender to her art without vacillation, like Odysseus to Circe, with the magic herb of doubt just in case.

I was also greatly impressed by the [fearless and adventurous Janine Antony](#). Her *Slumber* (1993, 1994) was inventive, complex, and poetic, combining scientific and vaguely fairytale motives. In *Slumber* (1994), Antoni¹⁰ lives in the gallery for 28 days. While she sleeps, an EEG machine records her REM patterns, which she then weaves into a blanket from her night gown under which she sleeps. [More about her](#).

[Petr Pavlensky](#) represents conceptual street art in its extreme form and in a most oppressive kind of environment. The origin and style of his techniques could be recognized by those familiar with self-mutilation of convicts (not by political prisoners, whose craft is hunger strike) as protest in Russian prisons. Here is a [description](#) of the act:

On May 3, 2013 Pavlensky held a political protest action against repressive policies of the government. His art performance was called *Carcass [Tyua]*. Artist's assistants brought him naked and wrapped in a multilayered cocoon of barbed wire to the main entrance of the Legislative Assembly of Saint Petersburg. The artist remained silent, laying still in a half-bent position inside the cocoon and did not react to the actions of others, until he was released by the police with the help of the garden clippers.

When on November 9, 2015, I saw the headline “Controversial Russian artist arrested after setting fire to the door of secret services building,” I knew it could be only Petr Pavlensky.



The ephemeral and sometimes masochistic genre of performance art has a substantial and fascinating history with roots in theater and family entertainment (*tableaux vivants*). The radical and disturbing [Marina Abramović](#) is the leader in balancing on the edge.¹¹ There is a [documentary](#) about her: *The Artist is Present*. She says that performance art, unlike theater, is for real.

Modern art is literally anything you can call art and exhibit as such, and yet a few artists are always more daring and inventive than others without being vulgar, offensive, or scheming. But would I feel sympathetic to “lady in the glass box” as a concept if I disliked the actress instead of being her admirer? I emotionally accepted *The Maybe*, but rationally, I saw the specter of futility and dehumanization hovering over the absolute majority of modern art where humans play the parts of Things. That was when I suspected that I never see art *per se*. It is always the image in the center of the whole web of my individual intellectual and emotional associations, memories, preoccupations, and even current physical sensations. In other words, art is a mirror, and the mirror right now shows me myself, holding the poster “Add *homo sapiens* to Red List”



¹⁰ A [Ph.D. thesis](#) on Janine Antoni: Stephanie Ann Karamitsos, *The Art of Janine Antoni: Labor, Gender and the Object of Performance*, 2006.

¹¹ Some of Abramović’ experiments involve interaction with public with results, to no surprise after the “Zimbardo experiment” (also known as “[Stanford prison experiment](#),” 1971), that human crowd is naturally distributed between sadists and saints. This contradicts the assumption that the prison environment is the main reason for cruelty. Bullying is another natural experiment. See documentary *The Artist is present*, 2012.

Art is as tangible as rocks and bodies. You do not need to understand it, just touch the stretched out of nowhere hand of art. You will feel, however, that it is not the same as touching the warm living body. In spite of all experiments with nothing, modern visual art—painting, sculpture, installation, etc.—is overwhelmingly **thingish**, geometric, calculated, man-made (sometimes, industrially), and corporeal without any trace of the **soul**, except, probably, in environmental art, with its life dimension. The double nexistence of the spirit and matter in the minimalist outgrowth of modern abstract art is truly awe-inspiring. On the contrary, the full-bodied necrophilic art (Damien Hirst's animals in formaldehyde and Gunther von Hagens' plastinated human corpses) is as material, real, natural, solid as any exhibit in a museum of natural history or the notorious *Fountain* of Marcel Duchamp, which is not even the original urinal but its substitute. Even an elephant in brine, however, could not compete in my eyes with the absence of Tilda Swinton on her bed, still losing the warmth of her body. Am I really saying that?

As for [Andrey Kuzkin's, *Whatever is out there*](#), 2010, ([movie](#)) I do not know what to say or think. No, he is no rival to a fully dressed Tilda Swinton. But it is art, too. Say the mantra.

3. ART AS MONEY

Every great artist, writer, composer, inventor, and scientist was driven by instinctive fear to repeat something already done and known. Innovation is the magnet that separates the iron filings of greatness from the wood sawdust of mediocrity.

Why could the skimpy, defiant, arrogant, and violent novelty of the first abstract painters become routine mainstream with historically breakneck speed, while similar extreme innovations in music and literature are still confined to minuscule audience (to which I, now proudly wearing the badge “I have read *In Search of Lost time*,” belong)? Not expecting to find an indisputable answer, what else can I do but to keep searching for it at a place where Everything rubs shoulders with Everybody: the marketplace?

There is art and there is art market.

Visual **art for art’s sake** (*ars gratia artis*¹²), cloistered in palaces, temples, museums, and mansions, protected from elements and thieves, looks like the most exclusive, hermetic, and immutable human creation, removed from social turbulence, politics, and in fact, from anything else people care about, need, make, and consume. Art has little utility, but it has value. As for utility, in hard times—war, occupation, illness, cold winter—selling a painting could save life and burning could at least make a cup of hot tea¹³. Nevertheless, it is in good times that art sells for the highest price.

¹² The Latin motto appeared not in Antiquity but during the Industrial Revolution.

¹³ In good times, in a novel *You Should Have Known*, by Jean Hanff Korelitz (Grand Central Publishing, 2014), a woman explains her attraction to a man: “He has a Rothko!”

Money circulates through the large arteries and tiny capillaries of global civilization. Art market is one of the body's minor organs, like the spleen, and, however insular, it needs blood. Being just a man-made Thing¹⁴, art displays a mysterious special relation with money, something like the relation between the body and the soul, only I cannot decide which is which. In a way, art is money, if we skip squabbling over what "is" is.

The price of entry into museums is affordable or even free on some days. Visual arts are better accessible on the Web than published scientific papers. Sculptures, occasionally scandalous or baffling, challenge the weather and vandals in parks and squares. Yet art today is anything but *gratia artis*. It changes hands for weighty, even if digital, wads of money.

I believe in the penetrating power of image. It is not slowed down by logic and syntax. It invades mind as unstoppable front of parallel armed columns. It works its way forward, ringing the bells of associations in unpredictable manner. This is why I illustrate my Essays with small pictures instead of extra paragraphs. It is a habit of a chemist who thinks and converses about molecules not in mile-long chemical terms but in pictures. Here are two images to the point in **Figure 3.1**.



Figure 3.1. Soup can and yacht, one of each.

Andy Warhol's painting (actually, photo-transferred screen print) [Big Campbell's Soup Can with Can Opener \(Vegetable\)](#), 1962, 72 x 52", was sold for **\$23,882,500** at Christie on November 10, 2010 and the [Eurocraft 44 Explorer](#) yacht, 144' 04" could be ordered for **\$18,417,000** in 2015, to be built next year.

I wonder how much Andy Warhol's painting of that yacht could cost.

Although *Big Campbell's Soup Can with Can Opener* "is a highly important and rare early painting by Andy Warhol showing the great icon which quite literally changed the course of Post-War Art: the Campbell's soup can" (quoted from [Catalog](#)), the price is baffling because neither the content nor the form are in any way unique, all the more, artistic. Many people do it every day in advertisement industry and some keep the original in the pantry. What is unique and artistic, we are told—and Warhol insisted¹⁵ (and I agree)—is the very fact that it is **presented and sold as art**. It is a masterpiece of self-advertisement. Any masterpiece has a golden aura and, even if it is art robbery, can inspire a masterpiece of a movie.



Napoleon is famous (among other merits, as art plunderer) and I am not a bit surprised that his hat, one of several remaining ones, was sold in 2014 for

¹⁴ Here is a difference between thing and Thing. In performance art, exemplified by Marina Abramovic, the human plays the role of a thing, but the whole performance is a Thing because it is designed for income. Capitalized Thing is a super-species in the realm of economy, of which humans and ideas are two other super-species.

¹⁵ I highly recommend Warhol's *Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, 1975, [available online](#). It is a revolutionary *post factum* manifesto of modern art.

\$2.4 million. The hat caps the enormous historical shadow of Napoleon. But a picture of a soup can?

Andy Warhol's revolution in art was his declaration, influenced by Marcel Duchamp and others, that artist should obey only his own impulses, not necessarily artistic. The artist does not owe anything to anybody. On the contrary—and that was his own contribution to the doctrine—the buyer owes money to the artist for the result of his work regardless of content. The belief in the value of the work is its true content, which is to say that the artist himself, his life, escapades, sufferings, quirks, and, last but not least, financial status can be the exact content of his artwork, whatever is there on the canvas. We will come to that in ART AS BELIEF. Naturally, this content jumps to the largest value after such a grand event in artist's life as death.

I apologize. Sorry, sorry! I am ashamed of my retrograde juxtaposition of art and yacht. I was repeating the argument of the Duchess de Guermantes in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (*The Guermantes Way*):

There was nothing else in the picture, just a bundle of asparagus exactly like the ones you're eating now. But I must say I refused to swallow M. Elstir's [a fictional artist whose prototype was Édouard Manet] asparagus. He wanted three hundred francs for them. Three hundred francs for a bundle of asparagus! A louis [20 francs], that's as much as they're worth, even early in the season.¹⁶



Édouard Manet
(1832-1883). [Bunch of Asparagus](#), 1880.

The soup can is a kind of a triple point where (1) art, (2) art market, and (3) food market meet, quite like in Manet's *Asparagus*. Still, I ask myself the following question: what was exchanged in the sale of Warhol's work?

Both Manet and Warhol, separated by 100 years, had been ridiculed and both ultimately triumphed, although against different historical backgrounds. Both found supporters during their lives. Both were vilified for their techniques as well as for the choice of subject. Yet my personal impression is that if the legacy of Manet can be discussed in such a way that the opinions of experts gravitate to a certain consensus, any interpretation of the legacy of Warhol seems to be as true (or false) as ten others. For example, the can **opener** has been interpreted as a symbol of violence. Why not as a bold venture that had **opened** a whole new continent of content? Why not the sharpness of art that uncovers the meaning of everyday rot?

I think we have to give Andy Warhol another half-century to mature. It is yet a half-opened can. But it is already huge money.

With eyes already attuned to art, let us now look at money, a frequent and dear subject of Warhol.

¹⁶ (Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, translation by Moncrieff, Kilmartin, & Enright, *Modern Library*, 1998, p.686). There is a [real story](#) behind this episode. In fact, the painting was sold for 800 francs, but that was not the end of the story.

As compared with 3D sculpture and installations, the lower grade materiality of 2D painting gives the art form additional similarity with money. The material art is less material in painting. The materiality has potentially some further way to go down.

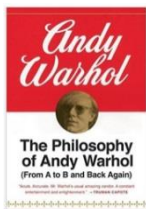
There were [reports](#) that the ultra-rich keep “billions of dollars’ worth of fine art and other treasures” in freeports where their materiality—and taxable value—may hardly ever be explored by human touch. “Under the freeport’s rules, objects could remain in untaxed limbo, in theory, forever.” Sam Knight, *The Bouvier Affair*, *The New Yorker*, Feb. 8&15, 2016.

There is a noteworthy investigation of the profitability of art for artists: Jonathan Jones, *Do rich artists make bad art?* ([The Guardian](#), 27 April 2006). The title question exemplifies the fundamental problem of art: **what is bad/good art?** This question has no answer. All we can agree on is the *fait accompli* of the sales history.

A single framed painting is neither good nor bad. It is a leaf on the evolutionary tree. It is a point in history. It is a point on a numerical scale. Art as a system (exsystem: evolving complex system) is not as numb as it may look in a gallery: it breathes, moves, morphs, and tries to catch your eye with flirtatious makeup. With such signs of robust muscular life, art is truly abstract in the sense that its only measure is the latest sales number.

Picasso and Warhol were two, among many, pinnacles of modern art who had been considered “bad” art in the beginning of their careers. Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973) produced over 10,000 paintings, many of them priced later in millions of dollars. Using a great variety of techniques, he also made ten times more prints, some in 500 copies and some in much less. There are hardly any high rank prints on the market below \$1000 and rarer prints cost ten times more. Picasso printed his own money, one could whisper, multiplied by posterity many times over. He hardly used it himself, however.

Picasso the misogynist does not excite me as artist.¹⁷ But I am certainly a misfit: I am bored even by most of Mozart, as I am confessing ahead of ART AS MIRROR. Andy Warhol, as all pop and minimalism, repels me—something I should probably keep in the dark as a shameful secret, as if shameful secrets have no value in our days.



When [Andy Warhol](#) (1928 – 1987) died, he left over 90,000 works, including 4,100 paintings, 9,000 drawings, 19,000 prints, and 63,000 photographs. This makes his creations, often deliberately cloned—like his posts stamp sheets of multiple Marilyn Monroes or Campbell soups and pictures of money—closer to paper currency or mass products than anything else. Money was his obsession of which he left a record in his [Philosophy of Andy Warhol](#), where money is on the foreground. Here is a quote:

I like money on the wall. Say you were going to buy a \$200,000 painting. I think you should take that money, tie it up, and hang it on the wall. Then when someone visited you, the first thing they would see is the money on the wall.

¹⁷ [Jonathan Jones cites](#) Picasso’s warm relationship with Lee Miller as evidence that he was not a misogynist. But his portraits of the American photographer, not to mention all his other pictures of women, mean in my universe that he was. Jonathan Jones admits the “cartoonish cubist freedom” of those portraits in which Picasso’s “art suffers.”

In our times of great income inequality (as if there ever were times of equality), it is curious to read Warhol who saw a can of Coke as a unifying and equalizing symbol: millionaire or not, everybody drinks the same Coke (I do not. Long ago, I used to drink Pepsi.).



Andy Warhol, "200 \$1 bills," 1962, fragment

In the [catalogue](#), it was presented as a "monumental masterpiece," one of "testaments to a pivotal moment in art history" and "a form of art that would remove the hand of the artist."

In 1962, Andy Warhol, on his ascent to the status of a megastar of American pop art, painted, rather creatively, 200 \$1 bills on a silk screen. He did not even paint each bill, but multiplied the initial batch by a special procedure. The large painting looked as a yet uncut rectangular sheet from the press of US Bureau of Engraving and Printing. In 2009, after prolonged languishing in a private collection, it was estimated at \$8,000,000-12,000,000 but sold for \$43.8 million at a

Sotheby art auction in New York to an unidentified



Andy Warhol, *Roll of bills*, 1962

At the same auction, an untitled 1962 drawing of a roll of dollar bills tied with a string, also by Warhol, was estimated at \$2.5-3.5 million and sold for \$4,226,500. Warhol also painted the dollar sign \$. The very idea of painting numbers and signs was not new by that time.



Jasper Johns, 0-9, 1960

Jasper Johns is recognized as one of the greatest modern artists. In the 1960's, he painted, among other mundane objects, letters and numerals. A set of his ten 27' x 21' color lithographs, a painting of one numeral on each (1969), was on sale at Christie's in 2014. Estimated at \$400,000 – \$600,000, it was sold for \$485,000.

The modern greatness of the three above-mentioned modern artists is undisputable.

There is an unrivaled degree of unanimity about money on earth. There is no such agreement about human life. The world believes that money is always good and the more the better. This is, probably, the only ecumenical belief not stained with doubt, in spite of the frowning Bible with its camel and the eye of a needle.

The nominal value of a money bill is undisputable because (1) it is numerical and (2) it is printed on a solid thing that cannot change its appearance spontaneously or by somebody's wish. It is like an art print on good old-fashioned paper, not a submissive digital file to be processed in a photo shop.

Art is open to endless and irreconcilable arguments about artistic value. Money (for money's sake) is not. A number, accompanied by the same currency sign, cannot have two interpretations. That $2 > 1$ or $345 < 543$ is always true by definition. Not many other things can be as uncontroversial. We do not argue which day of biblical creation was which: they are numbered by Creator himself.

To deal with zillions of numbers, all we need is the distinction between MORE and LESS and the ability to compare any two numbers in those terms. If neither MORE nor LESS applies, the numbers are EQUAL. Computers run on such simple principles and teach humans not to care whether number 10 refers to people, commandments, sins, or soup cans.

In contrast, the value of an artwork other than in terms of money is never consensual and it changes with time. The money-art-value relation involves the uncertainty caused by differences between humans, as well as by circumstances. The flow of time, if too fast and turbulent, changes everything without warning.

There are strong bonds of similarity between money and art. They did not exist when images were painted on the walls of caves and temples. Paper money looks like a picture, has a signature and a unique number on each bill, and is made by printing, like artistic prints. Money is printed by billions ([36.4 billions of US notes](#) in 2014, to be exact), paintings and prints can be produced by thousands—the difference is only quantitative.

The framed “money” of art wildly differs in the value of its “banknotes.” Still, by “printing” this kind of money, a few artists could make significant fortunes. Art is not a disposable stuff like old paper money. It is not in constant circulation and is protected against damage. This advantage rarely works for the artist whose life is too short. Productivity can prolong the life of the struggling artist but may not be enough to shorten his struggle. Mass production is an inspiration for any artist who, having tasted success, is sick and tired of struggling.

More lasting than ships, bridges, and some buildings, art is the closest object we can find in the vicinity of immortality.

Art can be stolen, which is never easy, always risky, and requires an artistry of a special kind. But the greatest advantage of art money today is that valuable artwork cannot be hacked! Having just finished *Future Crimes* by Mark Goodman (Doubleday, 2015), the latest compendium of cyber horrors, I begin to think that the worldwide art frenzy is driven, subconsciously or not, by a promise of digital safety. Some compare it with the Dutch tulip mania of 1630. Nonsense! Tulips perish and paintings do not. And if they did, modern art could be perfectly forged and imitated because it possesses the never before appreciated potential of ultimate simplicity and self-similarity. This is why minimalism flourishes. Am I carried away? Yes. Maybe not. Definitely.

If painting of money is art, so is paper money *per se*.

Money is designed by artists. The last French and German money before the euro displayed national creativity in arts and sciences. In the German set of paper money before euro, five out of eight bills were related to arts, and the rest to science. The 100 DM (1990) was dedicated to Clara Schumann.

The French 100 NF banknote (1998) was dedicated to Paul Cézanne, who painted hundreds of apples, alone and with other fruit, throughout all his life. It had his portrait and a reproduction of his *Pommes et Biscuits* (*Apples and Cookies*). The previous 100F (1991) was a tribute to Eugene Delacroix.

The euro banknotes follow the trend in an ingenious oblique way, showing architectural styles and bridges: the heritage and the very idea of the EU, although bridge is as much a symbol of division as of aspired connection.



Pre-euro French and German money.

Illuminating the essence of art as uniqueness, paper money can be investment of the same kind as art if it is sufficiently unique. Thus, a US \$1 bill with a rare number like C00000001C can cost thousand times its face value on collector markets.

Classical art was like gold: it was difficult to mine and born miners were rare. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, demise of aristocracy, rise of mass production, growth of middle class and free professions, accumulation of “new money,” spread of media, photography, and kitsch, intensification of urban life, the long centuries of classical monumental glory looked overshadowed by the coins given to Monet for his *Asparagus*.

Art had to undergo some adaptation in the spirit of Industrial Revolution, pick up some soot and dust, and mangle the freewheeling sophistication of natural forms to fit the minimalist geometry of engineering. The mutant and mutinous experimental monsters survived and became mainstream after a historically short fight. The gates opened wide to new art, not photographic, not traditional, easy to make, in abundant supply, but extremely unequal in its market value, with a very narrow flat top of a Mexican-style pyramid where big money was changing hands. In the age of advertising, the novelty and apparent absurdity of extremists worked well for the art as the whole.



The new way of making art more difficult to mine and keep up its value was to let artists compete in running up to the top of the pyramid of success, which is what markets are for, indifferent to what exactly you are bringing to marketplace, just bring your rank of success. Modern art is the product of modern competitive business, i.e., the interplay of productivity, supply, and demand, with each of the three capable of being manipulated. The artists, accomplished or potential, were reassured: “You can make it. Even if you are not Leonardo da Vinci, you could be compared to him and treated likewise.”

Art remained elevated to the spiritual realm and surrounded by a tribe of worshippers, but the spirit was changing, it seems to me, toward a kind of Paganism—the most democratic religion of all, in which you choose, woo, and pet your god and no distant absentminded God decides whether to punish you or reward for your uniqueness or ordinariness.

Elite can exist only on the shoulders of a big crowd. With the intoxicating vapors of luck and lottery in the air, competition animates promotion, patronage, publicity, and polemic. An establishment of experts grows between the artists and the public. Art expertise and sales becomes art. Art becomes economy. Art comes closer—but not too close, not too sweaty—to sport.

Does art market duplicate stock market? There is an [ongoing discussion](#) on this subject. The difference between art market and stock market is obvious but not overwhelming: absence of volume (exactly one item at an auction—not one thousand identical copies) and absence of an objective measure for the value of art. Yet there is a curious similarity. Both business companies and artists have the so-called intangible (non-monetary) component of the valuation, which is mostly guesswork. For example, in case of Apple, Inc., it is its reputation, fame, rumors, ego, and its performance art of self-presentation. In case of art, everything but sales history is intangible: reputation, fame, rumors, ego and theatrics. Although the demand for art is miniscule, regarding the number of buyers, liquidity in times of affluence seems unlimited, while the term “liquidity” does not make full sense: the acquired piece will not be resold with any immediacy.

Alchemy does not work with gold, but it works wonders with art. Andy Warhol formulated the law of art alchemy this way:

"Well," I said, "it doesn't mean if you don't believe in nothing that it's nothing. You have to treat the nothing as if it were something. Make something out of nothing."
([Philosophy of Andy Warhol](#)).

The “nothing treated as if it were something” is what I call *nexistence*.

The art transformation happened not because there had been any ideology and leadership. It happened because (1) mutations of the classical canon had been accumulating, (2) photography had taken over the pictorial function of art, (3) expansion of free professions had created the audience with a feedback, engagement, influence, new tastes, and new wallets, and (4) a new canon, a new DNA, loosely summarized as ART IS ARTIST'S SELFIE or MAKE SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING, turned out viable. Every artist can paraphrase Louis XIV, “*L'Art, c'est moi!*” Every beholder of art can say the same (I can), but that will be the subject of ART AS MIRROR, where I will promote the viewer's own *L'Art, c'est moi!*

Anyway, modern art is among the most benign area of human activity and its freedom is unrivaled. Unlike medicine, it is not marred by side effects. You can take it in any dose or not at all.

I cannot expand here in this direction because I am neither art expert nor art enthusiast. My main interest is to “understand the world,” as Ulf Grenander formulated it, in terms of patterns, not facts. Art is part of the world and I am trying to understand it on my terms. The good side of this undertaking is that I begin to see myself better, although not in a better light, while I see art in a better light, although through tinted glasses.


The realm of patterns, similar to mathematical formulas, only with the sign of similarity instead of equality, is unlike the solid, detailed, and provable professional knowledge. The patterns are small, simple, long living, indifferent to interdisciplinary borders, and cheap. The latter is, probably, the main detractor of their appeal. Can you get a grant for studying the Everything? If you can, wouldn't you need the whole Fort Knox for that?

Patterns emphasize not just similarities but also differences. I do not expect professionals to welcome pattern thinking: that would undermine the value of expert knowledge the same way photography had undermined realistic painting. But do not worry about realists: they turned to hyperrealism to make their own work difficult and have achieved stunning, even if ← disturbing, results.



Ron Mueck, "Mask II" 2001-2. Photo: John Haydon

Traditionally, art should be “mined” by manual labor requiring rare skills, complex techniques, expensive materials, and significant time. It was not intended for resale but could be given as a gift, and could linger for centuries in churches, palaces, and private buildings as part of personal wealth and memory. The difficulty to mine it from the canvass or a block of marble was a large part of its value, the rest being the ability of viewers to recognize the source of content: personality, character, story, nature, thing, situation, parable, illustration, abstract idea. In other words, art was inseparable from craft and reference to something outside art.

While art had been undergoing transmutation from gold to “fiat,” a similar process happened to money. Most money today does not exist either as animate or inanimate matter: it is a **state** of atoms in microscopic grains of matter stored by some institution: bank, mutual fund, brokerage, etc. Unlike matter, which cannot be easily created or annihilated, the **state** of a tiny spot on a magnetic tape, disk, or chip not only can be changed practically effortlessly, but also changed back and forth as many times as the manager (or a hacker) wants. And not only back and forth: it can wander all over the numbers from zero to trillions and more (I do not believe in infinity). This is something unprecedented in nature. Try to curl back an uncurled staple.  Reversibility is unnatural. Patterns of history, however, are reversible, as modern Russia exemplifies. The American North-South divide persists today as the Blue-Red one: it is the pattern of divide and, if you want, the Abrahamic religious divides—there are quite a few of them—could be examples on a global scale.

A number as big as 1,000,000 is just a lineup of just **20** such spots: 11110100001001000000. It is still a **small** system and it can be brought into any of its 2^{20} states with just a few finger taps. You cannot do such things with large natural objects and systems. Nobody can turn a \$1 paper bill into \$2, although you may believe it is the essence of business.

Money today is information plus the ability of the government to keep it truthful. Information today is nothing like the clay tablets¹⁸, stela of Hammurabi, or flammable books. It is just the **reversible** state of matter. The new reality and the essence of our era is that information is created and changed by a **reversible** process, with **irreversible** consequences. This has resulted in the current chaos of hacking and insecurity bringing us back to the night dangers in a medieval city or on a forest road.

No one can have full control over irreversible processes typical for evolving complex systems (*exsystems*). One can maintain a pattern over significant time, however, which, probably, together with the ability to change or reverse the pattern, is a definition of human power.¹⁹ Patterns are reversible. As for such evolving systems as arts, only a few despotic regimes have shown any burning desire to control them.

Money is based on trust in the power of the ruler or government—the money artist who makes physical money. Electronic money is still a new element on the surface of the Earth. I do not see any proof that anybody has—or can have in principle—a full control over any **reversible state of matter**. If somebody has brought matter in that reversible state, somebody else can bring it back or elsewhere. Digital money is as different from the however inconvenient material money as chess position from chess figures. Can that be true about modern art, which is always—and often monstrously—material? Art is not reversible, but its value is.

If human mind is just a state of matter in the brain, it can be manipulated and toggled even though the phenomenon of memory makes the state of mind only partially reversible.

In the states of mind attuned to something existing independently from us, existence sounds alarm when we deviate from sensual perception into nexistential fantasies. In the states of mind attuned to *nexistence*, the alarm bell is silent, even if doubt—the satellite of every faith—is quietly humming.

Money is not just numbers in ten colors. The terrain of money is as varied as the surface of the Earth. It has mountains with summits in clouds, jungles full of snakes and predators, prairies, and rivers that replenish the seas of liquidity and loss, sustaining life, work, and fraud along the way. Moreover, the terrain changes from day to day or by the hour.

Money is abundant but it takes a lot of work to make, unless you already have enough of it and do not need it for a few years. Given time, money breeds money like sheep and goats, the ancient form of currency. The hedge of the sheep corral was a precursor of hedge fund.

Until recently, portraits of “money artists” used to symbolize the power of coins and bills. Money, a piece of paper with pictures, is an equivalent of power, luxury, sex, and even beauty. Power, however, is also a universal currency: the head of state and the terrorist are trading in the currency of human life and fate. There is a poignant similarity between brute power and ethereal digital money: they are cheap to put to work. Bullets are as cheap as small change and they can

¹⁸ Sumerian and Babylonian clay tablets were, in fact, recyclable by soaking in water: the oldest precursor of computer memory after writing on sand.

¹⁹ Note that such definition grants to robots equality with humans.

do their job as efficiently as taps on the keyboard. Threats can ground a giant airliner and empty the schools of a metropolitan area. One can say that digital power was the first way to operate states of matter, if “digital” is used in its original Latin meaning: made by using fingers. In human matters, the fist has been probably the very first both currency and power.

The comparison of art with money (Google “art as currency”) nests snugly in my tuned-to-patterns mind. What makes people collect banknotes, not even very old, with odd serial numbers? What makes them collect art? What makes them pay \$38,000,000 for a painting of a vertical white line on a blue background? There is a whole genre of paintings presenting straight lines, vertical or horizontal, on a monochrome background. There are monochrome paintings without lines or anything else. Tom Sawyer could forge as many of them as you want and, probably, enrich the genre with masterpieces of his own. Poisoned once and forever with patterns, I see all minimalist masterpieces as just one—masterpiece, anyway. This is, probably, not the right attitude for any art lover. Am I really one? I sound like a bigot. See, money makes you lose your head like alcohol does.

Art market is an exclusive and peculiar place. Christie’s art auction is a Carnegie Hall into which one cannot get by exercise.

In art market, the seller does not need to persuade the buyer that the artwork will do some indispensable exciting job like Google Glass, Apple Watch, or Viagra. It has its own ticker, Artnet C50, comparable to major stock exchange indexes, and individual entries marked by the names of artists as if an artist were a company, which for some top artists is a quite exact characterization. There is a [description](#) of how the index is calculated.

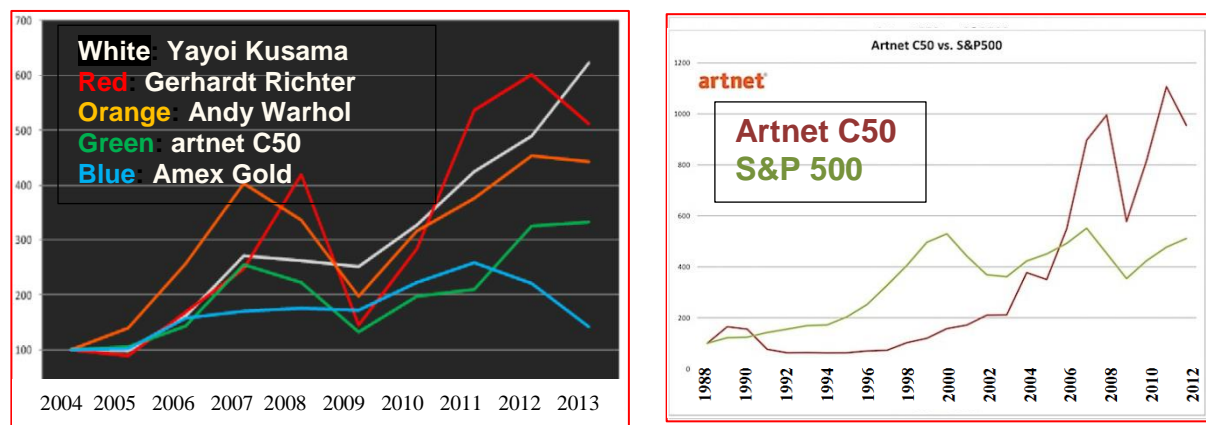


Figure 3.2. Art market. Left: artnet indexes of three artists vs artnet C50 and Amex Gold, 2004-2013. **Right:** Artnet C50 vs S&P 500, 1988 to 2012.

Figure 3.2 shows two modified index presentations of the art market compared to market indexes of gold and S&P 500. There is a discrepancy in C50 between both, as well as a distortion of Amex Gold (HUI) index.

The crucial difference between any individual artist’s index and major stock market indices lies, again, in different liquidity. Artists do not create artworks by millions and buyers of original art are not nearly as numerous as stockholders. In 2013 there were at least 600,000 mid-to-high art

collectors in the world (less than 2% of all millionaires), with 36.5 million of transactions in arts and antiques and the volume of sales around \$60 billion. [See a sample of report.](#)

It looks like art market is a more sensitive predictor of a coming economic bust than the leading stock market indexes. The Great Recession of 2008 was preceded by two years of stellar growth of art market. By 2015, we got the next boom. The stock market malaise of 2015-2016 is still in progress while I am writing these lines.

High priced art is from time to time bought by museums to make it public, presumably, forever. Thus, Amadeo Modigliani's *Nu Couché* (1917) was sold for \$370 million in November, 2015, to the Long Museum in China, to make art accessible without going abroad, as the buyer, the founder of the museum, explained. "Forever" is another kind of nexistence, though.

Money and art are two endless topics, double endless (there are different kinds of infinity in mathematics) if talked over together.

To judge means to compare. The artistry could be evaluated by people familiar with large volumes of art accumulated over a long time, i.e., in historical perspective, against personal and public background of artist's life. This was first done on the grandest scale by Giorgio Vasari (1511 – 1574) who was himself an artist and architect. It remains the main approach of art description, with history of sales never out of sight.

The public seemed to be quite capable to appreciate art as a source of instinctively recognized beauty, which produced an effect close to physiological. This effect has always been my own yardstick for music, poetry, and movies.

I end this chaotic and exhausting, as anything about money, Chapter with the following comforting quotations from [Vasari's Lives of the Artists](#) about Raphael:

[About the frescoes in the Raphael Rooms, Vatican Palace]. It is not possible to write of every detail in the works of this craftsman, wherein every least thing, although dumb, appears to have speech: save only of the bases executed below these pictures, with various figures of defenders and benefactors of the Church, and various terminal figures on either side of them, the whole being wrought in such a manner that everything reveals spirit, feeling, and thought, and with such a harmony and unity of colouring that nothing better can be conceived.

And, indeed, among his extraordinary gifts, I perceive one of such value that I for my part am amazed at it, in that Heaven gave him the power to produce in our art an effect wholly contrary to the nature of us painters, which was that our craftsmen—I do not mean only the lesser, but also those whose humor it was to be great persons; and of this humor art creates a vast number—while working in company with Raffaello, felt themselves naturally united and in such accord, that all evil humours vanished at the sight of him, and every vile and base thought fell away from their minds.

4. ART AS REFORMATION

Something happened to European art between 1870 and 1970, give or take a few years. Let us tentatively call it the Transformation. I am sure there are dozens of theories about that, none of them simple, but I am looking for simplicity.

A big-picture way to see change is in terms of revolution—a historically fast transformation that destroys and replaces. It blocks the way back and even a counter-revolution cannot restore the past. Whatever had happened inside art—I mean, not caused by barbarians—it did not destroy anything.²⁰ The past remained opened to the public, treasured, cared for, and valued even more so as it was getting more distant. Art today is perfectly peaceful (reaction to art is a different matter) and inclusive to all its historical stages, styles, and inventions. Whatever monsters it creates today, they are tame and counterbalanced by the lush beauty living in the woods among dreams of good times. Art is capable of enviable acceptance and tolerance, which is its distinction from religion, but about that later.

Was art shaken up by a technological revolution around? The invention of photography and its world-shattering digitalization could have initiated a change similar to climate swings, gigantic volcano eruptions, tectonic shifts, or huge meteorites that used to re-direct evolution of species. But modern photography, as all technology, is not only reconciled with but welcomed and fully absorbed by art as just a technique. It has great achievements as independent form.

Thinking about the advent of modern art, by which I have been intrigued for a long time, I begin to understand the diversity of change as not only a succession of discrete states, like changing models on a runway, but continuous deformation in all dimensions, like a magical garment that **continuously and reversibly** changes its design, colors, and size. This is something that the

²⁰ Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* could be an exception.

computers are so good at, but what is not supposed to happen in life goaded by entropy in one direction only, and by no means into a corral.



Ingres, *Comtesse d'Haussonville* (1845)

I wonder if a physicist could say that art is like an **ergodic system**, which can pass through all its possible states, wandering back, forth, and sideways, starting from any point.

What exactly happened in the Transformation? I wanted to understand it since my youth but while I wanted and waited, art was running ahead, its baffling annals swelling and bursting at seams. I finally got to them when they had become available on the Web. Here I am trying to explore art in terms more visual than verbal, with the help of art itself.



Figure 4.1. Modernization. Left to right: *Comtesse d'Haussonville* by Ingres (inverted fragment), *Portrait of Dora Maar* by Picasso, [Self-photo](#) of Dora Maar.

I start with Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780 –1867). In my opinion, Ingres, whose ideal was Raphael, combines the photographic exactness of detail with airy transcendence and economy in portraying beauty. Too sweet for some tastes, Ingres, in my view, represents classical painting on the brink of reversed metamorphosis: from butterfly to caterpillar. I was only slightly surprised to find out that Picasso, Matisse, Degas, surrealists, and even the stark on the wall but loquacious on the floor Barnett Newman considered Ingres their predecessor. Turns out, Newman called Ingres “abstract painter,” which is not the most extravagant of his opinions. They were typically even brasher than his paintings and certainly more entertaining.²¹



Ingres, *Grande Odalisque* (1814), Manet, *Olympia* (1863).



Comtesse d'Haussonville in **Figure 4.1** is a fragment of a **mirror image** of the original painting (1845). Ingres paints the young woman as if seen with misty eyes. It could be also taken for a lightly airbrushed photo for an advert and accused (not by me) of an enhancement or manipulation of reality.

²¹ *Through the Louvre with Barnett Newman* by Pierre Schneider 1969 in [Barnett Newman. Selected Writings and Interviews](#). University of California Press, 1990, p. 290.

Ingres believed that the most important thing in painting was drawing, i.e., shape, form, and lines. Nevertheless, his *Grand Odalisque* (1814) is, allegedly, anatomically incorrect.



Plain Tiger
(*Danaus chrysippus*)

Ingres followed his esthetic ideal. The reversal of the ideal of beauty was, I believe, an essential component of the Transformation under the slogan “back to caterpillar!” Not that I deny the [beauty of caterpillars](#)! But they just repeat the same segment many times, like the minimalist composer Philip Glass.

Édouard Manet (1832-1883) was at the very beginning of the Transformation. Curiously, it was his nude *Olympia* (1863) that heralded the new era with a thunder, but not because she was nude.²² *Olympia* outraged the easily excitable Parisians (who had tormented even Ingres) by her “shameless” looking straight in the eyes of the beholder. *Odalisque* had been already accepted into the family by that time. Manet suffered from hostility almost all his life. *Critical* and *hypocritical* are just one hypo apart and today more than ever.

A character in Marcel Proust’s *Search of Lost Time*, where art is also one of the main characters, witnesses the process of posthumous public adaptation to Manet, apparently, around 1898:

But anyway the other day I was with the Grand Duchess in the Louvre and we happened to pass Manet’s *Olympia*. Nowadays nobody is in the least surprised by it. It looks just like an Ingres! (Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, translation by Moncrieff, Kilmartin, & Enright, *Modern Library*, 1998, p.716)

But *Olympia* does not look like an Ingres. It looks just like a Manet. The most persistent accusation against Manet’s style was that his paintings were “unfinished.” I trust first impressions. That was exactly where the Transformation started.

One of the most important results of the Transformation in art was the breakup of the connection between the object or model and its image and later even with any object at all. To put it differently, art was accepted as pure unconstrained creation, a piece of matter, thing, fetish, object in itself, token, article, caprice, joke, artist’s logo, coat of arms, and a tangible investment—all defined solely by its place, purpose, and function and not content. Art became pure “self-expression,” an enigmatic term that sounds to me as a circular expression of an expression. Or, is it a random act on a whim, like making a circle in the sand with a stick or hurling a rock into a shop window?

Art, in all its forms, stepped through the Transformation into the ambiguous area of performance in a crowded competition for a rank and reward, both measured in numbers. This does not look to me as unconstrained creation. It is more like business. Even if the reward is not an issue, the rank in a kind of artistic Forbes Index always is.

²² *Édouard Manet: Rebel in a Frock Coat* by Beth Archer Brombert (Little, Brown and Company, 1996) is an account of Manet’s life as a reluctant firebrand.

The arrows in **Figure 4.1** point to *Portrait of Dora Maar* (1937) by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). The right arrow comes from the selfie of his model. There is nothing realistic about Picasso’s image of the beautiful and passionate—in life and on her photo—woman. Still, if you see Picasso’s painting, the photo, and the *Comtesse* side by side, not only some facial features of Dora Maar, but also the distilled and homogenized colors *à la* Ingres can be recognized on the picture by her deformer—in life and art—in which I see anything but love.²³ I feel like I’ve got really infected by artspeak.

Although the portrait of Dora Maar is not a quite typical for Picasso monstrous womanoid, the paintings in **Figure 4.1** exhibit the mystery of the Transformation better than any words: this is what happened with art, for better or worse, but why?

Revolution, mutation, innovation, liberation, reformation... I am looking for a better term and there is an array to choose from.

What happened is a much lesser mystery. It was dissolution of order, constraints, and rules without abolishing some fundamental orthodoxy of art rituals. If so, a more specific term looms as a competitor of Transformation: Reformation, *as if art were* a kind of religion. Is it? We will come to it later. “Reformation” lets you loosen your belt, pull out the tie, and unbutton the shirt, but the suit is still expected. Reformation of a particular kind, however, can also bite off a big chunk of your *joi de vivre*.

Reformation of art means looseness of order, canon, and constraint. It may lead to a greater variety and competition, encourage further evolution, and welcome freedom and equality. Reformation does not have a single human authority on earth, so that the followers of the creed can immediately begin splitting into fractions, each going to extreme in what Emile Durkheim, a theorist of religion, called *effervescence*.

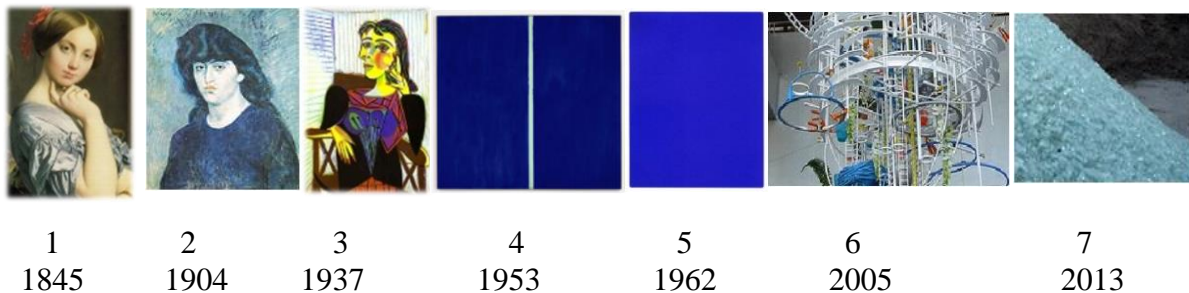


Figure 4.2. Reformation in blue: 1: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres; 2 and 3: Pablo Picasso; 4: Barnett Newman; 5: Yves Klein; 6: Sarah Sze; 7: Lara Almarcegui (glass rubble).

I present two more illustrations of the Reformation.

²³ There is a remarkable in many ways [website of Barbara Wells Sarudy](#) devoted to history and evolution of pictures of women.

Figure 4.2 illustrates the process of transition from classical (Ingres) to modern art with artworks ordered chronologically. It leaves only one feature invariant in the series: blue or off-blue color.

The contrast between artwork on the left, right, and in the middle of the series is mystifying, but it can be rationalized.

I see in **Figure 4.2** the three dimensions of the art space:

- (A) The scale from realism (1, 2) to deformation (3);
- (B) The scale from nature (1-3) to artifice (6, 7);
- (C) The scale from complexity (1-3, 6) to simplicity (4, 5, 7).

The contrast between simplicity and complexity is emphasized in **Figure 4.3**.

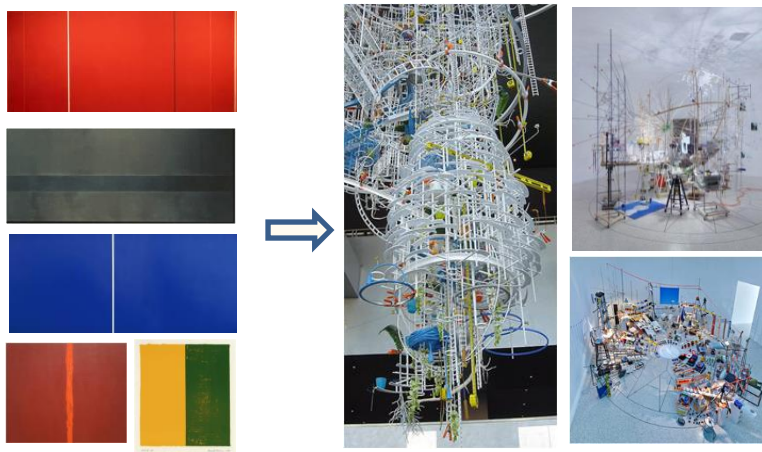


Figure 4.3. Minimalism and maximalism. Left: Barnett Newman; right: Sarah Sze.

Once something new emerges, it evolves to its logical end until it loses vigor and becomes routine. On the scales of complexity, innovation, content, sense, size, realism, reference, chaos/order, palette, material, labor—everything goes to extremes because the extremes attract extreme attention and suggest extreme performance. Thus, one end of the scale of complexity harbors the stubborn minimalism: the distant pattern descendant of Manet's “unfinished” manner turned into mischievous laziness. It has its own extremists in monochrome painting. The other end is taken by maximalists exploring grandiosity (Christo and Jeanne-Claude) and number of **different** components (Sarah Sze). If components were the same, as in Ai Weiwei's installations, I would call it malignant minimalism.

Entertainment is, probably, as old as culture itself. Human culture consists of two contradicting ingredients: routine and surprise. An inherent property of entertainment is its incessant novelty against the background of familiarity. Entertainment without novelty is a ritual. Ossification of novelty into ritual through imitation, self-imitation, and self-repetition, is a persistent trend of

modern art. If it is little noticed, it is because the enormous volume of art is dispersed all over continents, cities, and the Web.

The essence of the Reformation was recognition of art as visual entertainment, which automatically integrated it into business. The invisible hand of art market directs the show. That means anything but equality: it is growth, productivity, and competition.

Surprisingly, the kings of the art market offer not the most original but most mundane and universally **recognizable** creations. Those are flags, numbers, anatomical preparations, vacuum cleaners, photos of celebrities and grocery, polka dot patterns, kitsch, blots, and scrawls. This is a great paradox of modern art market, as if the invisible hand was guided by an invisible eye. I would call this effect “anchoring.” It spares the viewer of pains of imagination—the prerogative of the artist.

Modern art tends to increase the base to keep the spire well above the artistic masses yearning to breathe free. In this market, the productive simplicity has an upper hand over complexity of concept and form. The minimalist can simulate ingenuity by multiplying **identical** components (the caterpillarization) and oversizing a simple singular segment. “More, More, More,” the market roars.

I have no proof of what I am saying. Consider it a hypothesis. It could be researched and tested.

Art is what is called, displayed, exhibited, bought, and sold as art. I am not yet tired of repeating this. It is the institution and environment of art that makes a thing a piece of art, not its appearance, private opinion, decree, or face-to-face deal.

This circularity (“a rose is a rose is a rose”) applies to all subdivisions, forms, movements, genres, and styles of modern art. Thus, painting is what has a frame or clear borders, not necessarily rectangular (as in paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, Alan Charlton, Frank Stella), flat, or even 2D. Painting is what is called painting.

The Reformation absolved all previous artistic sins and turned them into virtues.

Transformation is an essential element of the Reformation. Next, let us look closer at the intimate details of transformation in art. How one **style** morphs into another? What are the innermost steps of that process?



Figure 4.4 Deformation as creative pattern. Far right: Francis Bacon (1909 – 1992), one of *Three Studies of George Dyer* (1969) .

There have been two major pattern ways to produce a modern mainstream artwork: deformation, **Figure 4.4**, and recombination, **Figure 4.5**. **Figure 4.4** starts with the picture of the globe and drags it through a sequence of Procrustean deformations of stretching, warping, and color change. Francis Bacon's painting leaves the haircut of George Dyer (1934–1971; a few photos can be found on the Web) as probably the only recognizable feature of the model, but the rest is heavily deformed. Deformation is a canonical practice of modern art styles that preserve some ties to reality.

The abstract picture of Joan Miró *The Smile of a Tear* can be **imagined** as produced from the picture of the globe by color analysis and creating the palette of basic colors and recombined as a new picture, which has nothing in common with the globe except the hint to a blue liquid (**Figure 4.5**). In this way, any picture, whether abstract or not, can be transformed into any other. With a minimum requirements, constraints, rules, and references to something else, all art is accommodated by a single abstract **art space**. The pattern of form is preserved while the pattern of content is absent except as a hint.

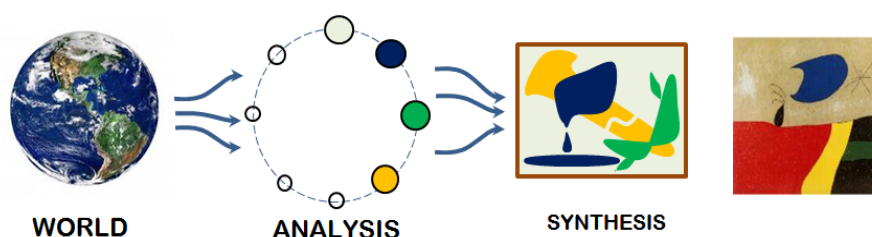
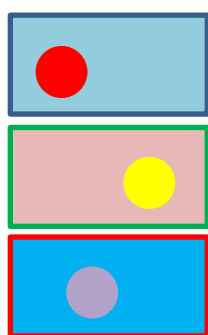


Figure 4.5. Analysis, recombination, and synthesis. Far right: Joan Miró (1893 – 1983), *The smile of a tear* (1973).

The modern artist paints not an object but a choice of rules, preferences, urges, and allusions characterized as style. He opens his bleeding heart to a consilium of shrinks. It looks like confession, but is it honest? We will come to it in ART AS BELIEF.

Deformation is irreversible in the sense that the artist can always deform a model image in thousands of ways, but the viewer cannot reconstruct the model from its deformation, unless there is an independent source. People in cartoons are recognizable if they are widely known and the artist controls and restrains deformations.



Artistic degeneracy

Recombinant art is prone to a sinister, in connection with art, phenomenon that is kosher in various fields of science: *degeneracy*. Although the corresponding adjective is *degenerate*, it is not the same as in “*degenerate art*” (*der entartete Kunst* in German) and there is no need to ward off Hitler's ghost. Degeneracy (not degeneration) in mathematics and physics means, very roughly, the situation when several mathematical objects or physical states are different, but have the same key property, for example, energy. A simple analogy is all “degenerate” combinations of various coins that have the same total \$1 value. Thus, to my artistic taste, all color combinations of rectangular bordered field with a circular spot in it have the same artistic value: they are degenerate variations. I know, artists will never agree. Sorry, folks, in my *entartete* eyes degenerate art exists. Don't look me straight in the eyes, however.

I believe that recombination is a degraded creativity.²⁴ Moreover, all spirals and scribbles and (I expect a lightening to struck me next moment) even all Mondrians are more or less the same for me. (It didn't! How's that?). But I also admit that in the eyes of an art collector they could be as different as Chevrolet and Maserati for a car buff. This is the moment when art tells me something about myself. What is it?²⁵

²⁴ My old manuscript [*The New and the Different*](#) is related to this problem. Each historically “new” circle in a rectangle is different, but not new. By the way, “degraded” is also a physical term applied to energy. The latter is, of course, a term of artspeak and artistic biographies.

²⁵ I am overly prone to generalization. I need to be degeneralized. Or degeneratize? Degener... what a nasty word! I am too irritable, demanding, narrow-minded, and intolerant.

5. ART AS STONE

I continue the confessional footnote 25 of the previous Chapter. I am not a believer by nature or practice. I am too introverted, reclusive, and padlocked. I am too rational. I want art to “change my life,” using the popular, on par with “disruptive,” modern cliché, but only for a moment. Otherwise, all I want from life is to let me be myself.

In this Chapter, I compare three modern artists who have unlocked some vaults in the basement of my mind. They are formally united with the theme of stone, as well as with my instinctive attraction to their work. All three of them are women. Their styles divulge some aggressiveness, but I am reluctant to resist it.

When in 2013 I was making my first steps into postmodern art, two names drew my attention: Sarah Sze, the mute Siren who was the first to lure me into modern art with her cryptic visual gestures, and Lara Almarcegui who initially seemed to exemplify with her giant piles of construction debris all that is forbidding in art. It took me almost two years to bump into Cornelia Parker, thanks to BBC, which shows how big but insular modern art is and how much study one needs to become its educated devotee, which I am far from being one.

Sarah Sze is well represented on the Web. There was a [story about her boulders](#) in *New York Times*. They are but a small part of the enormous *Triple Point* exhibition covering, unbelievably, the entire Venice. The boulders are made of an aluminum skeleton pasted over with photos of real boulders. The artist was said to be giving away some boulders to Venice residents to put on balconies and windowsills.

My googling for the rest of Sarah Sze’s creative work revealed a great diversity of her art, unexpected and surprising even after the *Triple Point*. She is an orchestral Mahler-type maximalist, but there are also quartets and solos in her chamber pieces. Diversity, variety, complexity—such qualities seduce me easily. I feel myself a kid in a toy store. Do I begin to sound like Vasari about Raphael?



Sarah Sze. Small part of exhibition at the USA Pavilion at Venice Biennale, 2013. Photos: [Darren Milligan & Brad Ireland, Flickr](#) and [DOMUSWEB](#). See also **Figure 4.3**.

My initial reaction (close to “it can’t be!!”) was a consequence of my prejudice and ignorance regarding modern art, but it did not last a day. I felt instinctively attracted to the exuberant complexity, childish playfulness, and sense of humor of the artist. I suspect even some self-irony. Today, three years later, I understand that Sarah Sze’s flea market art resonated with my personal life long obsession with Everything and what unifies the natures of Things and humans, as well as what makes them different. I was captivated, intrigued, and drawn to something I had missed in visual art. There was also my instinct of a chemist. I projected on the artwork my own pattern-chemical ideas. There was some rapport between my life and the eccentric creations looking at me from the computer monitor. I have never met them face to face.²⁶

Then I ran into the intimidating and not less eccentric burial mounds of Lara Almarcegui, Sarah Sze’s Spanish mate at the Venetian Biennale of 2013. What a contrast!

Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, a contributor of great photos of art on Flickr, [noted](#) on Spanish Pavilion: “The pavilion is filled with a huge pile of rubble which leaves visitors perplexed and perhaps evokes the social and economic situation of Spain today.”

This time I did not trust my first impression. After some research, I found out that Lara Almarcegui was interested, quite like a biologist, in the life of the cities, their youth and decay, anatomy and physiology. She “deconstructed” buildings into their primary materials and exhibited their components as piles of stone, concrete, glass, etc., the size of which preserved the ratios of the quantitative composition. That was, in my eyes, pure analytical chemistry. From this angle, the constructs of Sarah Sze now looked like molecular models of Everything. Lara’s exhibition at Venice Biennale, 2013 was a decomposition of the same pavilion in which it was located. There is her [video presentation of the project](#).

²⁶ The US exhibition at next Venetian Biennale of 2015 (artist Joan Jonas) and Sarah Sze’s garden of the *Secret Installation* at a separate place look on the Web trivial, second hand, contrived, and tired. Sarah Sze even crudely imitated Cornelia Parker’s hanging bricks, see next page. But it all should be seen live.

In my eyes, the monoculture art of Lara Almarcegui detracts from artistry but compensates for that with rationality. If abstraction is beautiful anywhere, it is not in art but in science. I can only hail such intellectual leaps. They attract me immensely. I happily surrendered to the rocky charms of the second Siren.



Figure 5.1. Lara Almarcegui. 1. Spanish Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2013; 2: Part of its deconstruction (with detail insert); 3, 4: Messe Basel Exhibition Center; 5: Its deconstruction list; 6: Exhibition at Vienna's Secession, 2010.

Truly, complexity is my catnip. Cornelia Parker's contribution to my collection of stone art was hovering between the floor and the ceiling. It was aptly entitled *Neither From nor Towards*. The stones, suspended on thin wires from a framework under the ceiling, were bricks from houses that had fell over years from eroding cliffs in Dover. They were worn smooth by the tide.

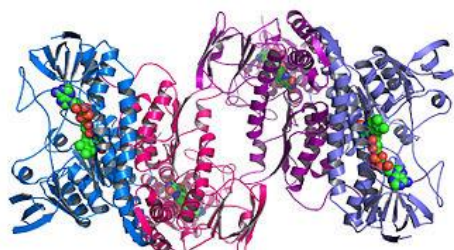


Figure 5.2. Cornelia Parker, *Neither From Nor Towards* (1992). Photos: [Matt Kieffer](#). See also photos by [Patricia Rogers](#).

The wire suspension has been used by the artist on a great variety of things, among them brass musical instruments and silverware cruelly flattened by a steamroller. Self-repetition is a most common side effect of artistic success and, evidently, sometimes its source and necessity. Cornelia Parker is both young enough and famous and her current projects are completely and irresistibly crazy and are “bad in a good way,” borrowing the expression from artspeak.

What can the three Sirens tell the chemist who, like a frog, inhabits both parched science and swampy arts?

Sarah Sze is about connectivity, which is the very core of chemistry, music, and poetry. A structure of a complex enzyme is a finished picture (it is actually, a ready 3D installation) of what complexity is: a hierarchy of selectively interconnected units. A biopolymer is a mostly dull linear sequence the beauty trick of which is elaborate and fragile folding. Can anything in civilization have this kind of structure? A narrative, a text of a novel, a book of ideas, and a computer code come to mind. The best public speeches of Barack Obama remind of the same pattern.



The structure of dehydrogenase from *Colwellia psychrerythraea*
(Wikipedia)

Lara Almarcegui is an analyst and a maximinimalist. Her piles consist of almost identical “atoms.” She commands tons of solid stuff to sit in place for a short time of the exhibition. Her heavyweight art, paradoxically, both monumental, and ephemeral, is also brave and thoughtful, but it sits on the very borderline of complexity.

Cornelia Parker is quite capable of explosion, but not that of complexity. She captures in her suspended animation the fleeting moment of transformation, the “transition state,” which is the main concept of chemistry of molecules and patterns. It separates initial (*From*) and final (*Toward*) stable states and is the key concept is to understanding the process of transformation of *Now* into *Next*. To my ears, however, the gagged screech of the tortured musical instruments drowns out the song of the Siren. I don’t like mass murder of Things, not to mention people and animals.

Cornelia Parker is drawn to destruction. She is about connectivity, too, but in an ambiguous way. She said in an [interview](#): (2009): “I first started making wire **drawings** from melted-down objects because the process of making wire is called “**drawing**.” She connects words, ideas, and matter. Tilda Swinton sleeping at MoMA in her performance *The Maybe* (ART AS MATTER) is another example of Cornelia Parker’s convoluted associations.

The topology of Parker’s inventions is unbound. Her connectivity has intergalactic range. But self-repetition begins to stick out. Why not to establish something like patent system in the modern art in order to boost sinking creativity? Thou shalt not steal, even from yourself.



Cornelia Parker at Whitworth Gallery, 2015.
Photo: [Damian Entwistle](#)

There is another common theme in the three songs of stone, as I hear it. They are about off-picture humans in their by far outliving them but still mortal dwellings with their walls, foundations, naturally scattered around detritus of daily existence, and the gentle *memento mori* for which stone is used since time immemorial. (Ha! I am really under the spell of the Sirens)

The stones of the three artists—one fake, the other real, the third dead—again tell me something about myself—the subject I will return to in ART AS MIRROR, which is also about stone, in a way.



Raphael, *The Fire in Borgo*.

balloon dog, or even self-portrait.

I am intrigued by rational aspects and implications of modern art. I appreciate novelty, inventiveness, and originality. I like the play of ideas. This is what attracts me in science. But it is not comparable with the physiological effect that music, poetry, or film and literature can have on me. In my exploration of modern art, I am driven by intellectual motives: I want to understand its origin and message. Yet the conception, gestation, and birth of art are still mostly old-fashionably human. The artist as the behind-the-scene creator or self-performer is for me the main component of modern art, not the shark,

The modern—and now even classical—art as a whole entertains me but rarely excites. Looking at the Raphael's *The Fire in Borgo*, I cannot share the exaltation of Vasari regarding this fresco (see the conclusion of ART AS MONEY). I have the same problem with most of Mozart.

I discern a difference between artistry and artifice. Artifice is about *what* and artistry is about *how*. Anything repetitive is artifice and everything unique is artistry. Nothing is more exciting than uniqueness and the unique evidence of a uniquely talented human.

Music and text are cardinally different from visual art. They blind out the powerful distraction of vision: that big, greedy, and egotistic part of our animal design. Text and sound are not real in the same way image is. They need a preparation, training, or gift to understand complicated music and poetry and untangle their complexity. To understand and love Rilke or Bartok is an art in itself, like the art of human relations and love.

Knowing modern art mostly by reproductions and photos, I find it preposterous, frivolous, and boring. But the more I see and the less I read about it, the more tolerant I become: tolerance comes with knowledge. Then sympathy, longing, and quiet joy of recognition might follow, like the relations with a few people to whom we feel attraction and sympathy. Our favorite artwork starts an independent life in... in... but where? It is hard to find a name for the place. Let us still reserve for arts our belief in however nonexistent soul.

Somebody who stays in contact with large quantities of art, as either fan or professional, can easily acquire the same fine selective taste to it as a wine aficionado. As I said, my access to visual art was very limited for most of my life. Access to music, poetry, and literature was much wider. But in any case, the greatest market icons do not cease to repel me with a glaring absence of artistry. As Sarah Thornton put it, “an actor playing the role of artist.”

Striving for objectivity, I admit that, having been suddenly transferred from Soviet Russia to America over 50 missed years of world history, I could be too conservative and pre-modern to understand the spirit of postmodernity.



Figure 5.3. Stone, canvas, and air. Left to right: Natural stone [Travertino Rosso Persiano](#); Barnett Newman's paintings *Anna's Light* (1968), and Hurricane Patricia over Mexico, October 23, 2015, satellite (NOAA).

Figure 5.3 is just my accidental association *à la* Cornelia Parker on the theme of stone, air (its extreme opposite), and the nature of abstract art. Consider it my own derivative art, for a moment.

Hey, aren't the vertical zips of Barnett Newman of the same blood as the wires of the stone hangers?

Art is intoxicating or, in Nietzschean artspeak, Dionysian. Here is an [insightful observation](#) that I want to quote as a prelude to ART AS FUTURE:

This desire to make art more about experience rather than meaning makes me wonder, if modern art is supposed to be a reflection of our modern times, are we approaching a more Dionysian era in society? Is our long grown belief of Apollonian decaying to give way once again to a Dionysian way of living?

I think so. The author is Ian Heckman in his blog [“Roots half-hidden”](#).²⁷

²⁷ In his new artistically excellent book *Fracture : life and culture in the west, 1918-1938* (Basic Books, 2015), Philipp Blom seems to associate the two world wars with the preceding hedonistic (what I would call Dionysian) culture after WW1. I believe we (or at least 1%) are still deep in another Dionysian phase, inciting comparisons.

6. ART AS ABSTRACTION

The advent of abstraction looks like the sharpest turn in the entire history of art. It came like a thunderbolt or wildfire—the common metaphors of artspeak. Like automobile, which left space for horses, or cinematograph, which left time for theater, it spared classical art. I hesitate to compare it with the onslaught of computers, however, until I am quite certain that they will be as merciful as art is.

Abstraction is typically defined in a negative way as “turning away” from creating **recognizable**, even if simplified, schematic, mutilated and twisted, images of real world. Other definitions sound positive, like “a visual language of shape, form, color, and line” (Wiki). The metaphor of language fits any art and science, if not everything humans do, like “language of sex” (Google: About 327,000 results, 0.26 seconds) and “language of food” (about 13,000,000 results, 0.31 sec.), but the abstract “language” has no common grammar: a mere vocabulary to which the artists apply their personal grammars. Some more cautious definitions realize that abstract, modern, classical, and any other art cover a continuum. If so, definitions lose any utility and the revolutionary effervescence fizzles.

Yet the change of the art landscape has been apocalyptic. It is as if the earth suddenly filled up with all creatures of the past and present, as well as their fragments and crossbred chimeras, suggesting an act of Invisible Hand.



Language is impossible without despotic **constraints** of grammar. Abstraction outside art is a process of formulating a single rule for a set of concrete cases, which usually reserves a place for yet unknown cases. It names many things with one name—exactly what mathematics is about. The grammar is possible because reality—and even dreams—is not completely chaotic but



ordered by strong **constraints**. Thus, an animal cannot be in two separate places at the same time and a river keeps flowing although it is invisible behind a tree.

Although scientific, philosophical and, actually, any idea is always abstract, while observable reality is always concrete, an artwork is never completely abstract for two reasons. The factual content of artwork is largely consensual: “taking Jesus down from the cross,” “color dots on white background,” “a pile of candies,” “red squiggles,” “chaotic color zones.” The impact on a viewer, on the contrary, is subjective. If it is widely similar over large groups of viewers of classical art on Biblical themes, it is under the powerful **constraint** of its textual source, even if it yields to the irreverent spirit of modernity.

I understand art as a whole in terms of combinatorial configurations, which means that there are distinct components selected and connected (arranged) in a particular way. I do not think it is much different from the way Kandinsky saw it. Art is a giant salad bar of ingredients with a stack of small plates, such as a place on the wall, floor, ground, or levitation in the air. The difference between classical and modern art is that the former has constraints imposed by the object, and the latter is constrained by the personality of the artists and the extent of his borrowings from others. Deformation and recombination bridge one with the other.

I bet we can repaint any classical painting, like Velazquez’ *Las Meninas*, while slightly proportionally resizing figures and reshuffling the composition, like moving the dog to the left, and some viewers would not notice the difference. It will be recognized as Velazquez or at least a perfectly classical realistic painting. Classical art preserves large blocks of reality, as if rearranging the same furniture in the room and from time to time replacing the pieces.



Diego Velazquez (1599-1660), Left: *Las Meninas*; Right: It is still Velazquez, isn't it?

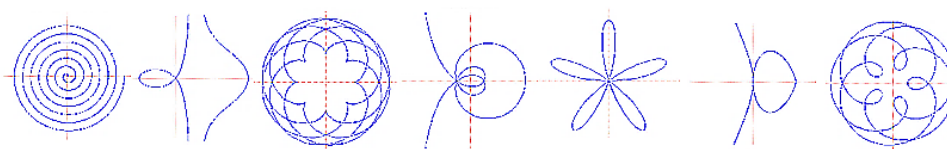
Straight line, curve, polygon, grid, circle, and square, not to mention Platonic solids, are well recognizable objects for somebody with appropriate professional background. So are arbitrary and chaotic squiggle, blot, smudge, curve, and blob.

If we **recognize** a forged cubist portrait by Picasso as ... a cubist portrait by Picasso, it means that we recognize art of Picasso as a natural phenomenon. This is what the cliché “art enriches the world” means.

What makes art “abstract” is the whole image that we perceive but cannot **anchor** it in our experience because we have a different experience or none at all. Instead, we compose an associative narrative from our impressions. Unlike the artwork, it is really abstract because it exists only in our mind, as any idea. Or we can listen to artspeak instead and decide whether we trust the artspeaker as much as we trust, for example, a mathematician.

Mathematicians²⁸ work with a big zoo of forms and they have a refined taxonomy of their darlings. Unlike paleontologists, they have no problem with reconstruction of their origins.

Mathematics has its own abstract celebrities. They are as famous, in a way, as Warhol’s *Marilyn Monroe*, although less than the actress herself. See [Famous Curves Index](#). Here is a small selection.



Famous curves. Left to right: Spiral of Archimedes, Conchoid, Epicycloid, Plateau Curves, Rhodonea Curves, Pearls of Sluze, and Epitrochoid

Each curve is a plot of a mathematical function. It is abstract in the mathematical sense, i.e., one standing for many, because there are infinite numbers of Spirals of Archimedes, all described by the same simple equation $r = a\theta$ (in radial coordinates) with different parameters a .

There is a similarity between even most chaotic abstract art and slender visualizations of mathematical objects. They both can be represented by a set of instructions applicable to an indefinite number of images. Thus, there are websites that instruct amateurs how to paint abstract pictures, for example, [5 Easy Ways to Create an Abstract Painting](#).

Mathematical regularity became a source of [Op Art](#), which presents carefully controlled order and chaos in various proportions. [Computer art](#) is its next logical expansion



Bridget Riley
(b.1931),
Arrest I (1965)

and it generates images of exquisite beauty and wild intensity (**Figure 7.1**), which may suggest that regularity is the essence of beauty. Symmetry is an example of regularity. [Robotic painting](#) is the natural next step. Can the 19th century shock of photography repeat itself in history of visual art as digital shock? Well into the new era, nobody has been shocked yet. Art has a big heart.

Kandinsky’s *Line and Point Manifesto* looks to me, with hindsight, as a prophesy of the Digital Era. Art is prophetic in a self-fulfilling way. Abstract art is the ideal task for computer with its unlimited imagination, ability produce chaos²⁹ and harsh order in any proportions, and its lack of any constraints whatsoever. The machine does not care about the real

²⁸ Relation between [mathematics and art](#) is widely represented on the Web.

²⁹ There is no algorithm for pure randomness and computers use it various surrogates. The pseudorandom number can be unpredictable and cryptographically secure, but randomness and algorithm are incompatible notions.

world populated with humans, and would not give a dam for the entire universe. The dimwitted humans, with their narrow-minded algorithms of instincts, their quirks, sensibilities, and prejudices, are nothing but impediment for the unbound computer creativity that only another computer can fully appreciate.

Being one of them humans, I kind of like our breed. Humans have an insatiable curiosity toward themselves and their companions. They also have an inborn but not uniform sense of beauty. I believe—no, I hope—that the future belongs to some kind of post-abstract art with a human shadow, if not human face. Not forever, of course, only before the pattern pendulum plunges into the next of its two swings. A small perk of being mortal is that we do not need to care about anything for too long.

At least put your photo on the back of the canvas, painters!

The phenomenon of **anchoring**, the visible or, mostly, hidden instinctive and subconscious gravitation of abstract art toward real world, which I have discovered, to my surprise, during my years of pilgrimage from Sarah Sze to Cy Twombly, makes me, uncharacteristically for my personality, elated. I can even go further into generalization: **nothing material can be abstract in any sense because of its thingishness**. The Thing is always concrete. I have my way of going to extremes.

Artwork, as I said, is not a Thing because it is unique and not mass-produced. Yet the gloomy maniacal self-similarity and self-repetition of some modern artists puts art right on the Thing's side of the border between Thing and thing.

There are two opposites of the term *abstract* if applied to art: concrete (factual) and real (physical). The painting is always both concrete and real, as any piece of matter. It is its meaning that can be recognized or not, and realistic for one person while abstract for another. Arts, whether classical or modern, are vast expansions of Rorschach blots.

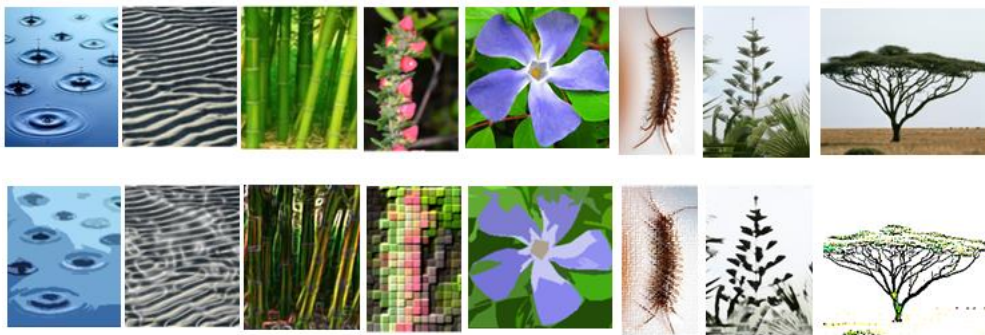


Figure 6.1. Top row: Regularity in patterns of nature. Similar combinations of similar elements. Bottom row: the same with artistic effects of Microsoft Word.

Nature is a rich source of repetitive visual properties that can be generalized over particular cases. Simplification makes them look like abstract art.

Looking at **Figure 6.1**, I begin to think that the main property of abstract art, from its birth to current over-the-hill age, is simplification. Edouard Manet seems to be the true founder of abstract art, although I still do not know what was driving his hand, because he did not associate himself with the new wave.

What is simplification? In art, it is just minimalism, pretense, affront. In science, it is the essence of understanding. In politics, demagoguery. In philosophy, extinct. In modern life, forget about it.

I begin to think that the genre of drawing and the technique of print, which employed simplification by necessity, were among the genes of the classical art that had become dominant in modern art from the very beginning. But the primary reason for that still evades me. If I am right, modern art was a mutation developed and socially justified as Reformation. Didn't the religious Reformation start as a mutation in the mind of Martin Luther? By the logic of Daniel Kahneman, it could be classified as fallacy. For more about that, see my [**Essay 58: Pattern Chemistry of Rationality: All rational minds are alike; each irrational mind is rational in its own way.**](#) Its long subtitle is all that relevant.

I have already mentioned complexity over 20 times in this Essay. It is time to inquire what the term means.

Simplicity and complexity sound like two opposites, but they are parts of the same scale ranging from zero to indefinitely large values. This is why I think that there is only one parameter, complexity, and simplicity is just low complexity. It is difficult to say how high complexity of something is because different people and different professions may easily disagree.

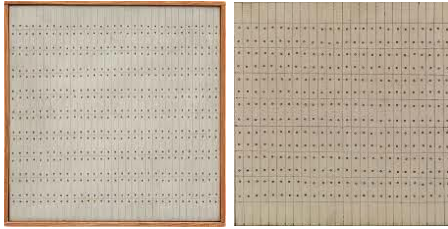
I do not believe in infinity, but I am certain that complexity is a crucial, although neglected and little explored parameter of any aspect of our civilization and human matters in general. For example, we could be interested in the size of a potential enemy's army and its armaments, have our triple numerical advantage, but if the enemy's organization and decision making is three times simpler than ours, we probably have three times less chances to win. The numbers are wild guess, but the bleak history of long American wars could have a truly simple explanation: complexity of political system. Not accidentally, the Civil War (1861 – 1865) was one of the shortest: the complexity difference between the sides was minimal.

There is the concept of Kolmogorov complexity in mathematics: object **A** is more complex than object **B** if its **shortest** full description is **longer** than that of the other. It sounds like oxymoron, but I really cannot go here into details because of the lack of consensus and my own qualifications. Strictly speaking, this concept is applicable to strings of symbols in computation, where meaning of all symbols and words is well defined.

I think that there are problems in science that can be treated only with the inclusion of human presence and subjectivity into the picture. Anthropic principle in cosmology is an unsettling example. Pattern Theory and theories of complexity belong to this type, too. Probably, science needs a marginal Reformation: including human choice into the subject. Thus, Pattern Theory requires a subjective choice of its basic terms, but no

matter how exactly, unlike in cosmology. It is like choosing which of the green beans on your plate to start with.

I will jump to conclusion in the form of an example. A change in a realistic painting is recognizable and it can change artistic values of the artwork because the shortest description is



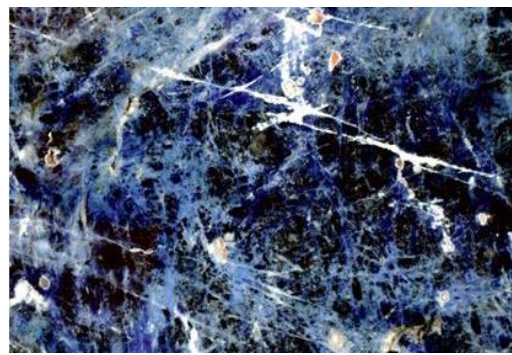
Agnes Martin, [Untitled \(1962\)](#) and [Little Sister \(1962\)](#)

really short. The shortness comes from using large blocks of recognizable information coded by short phrases, like “the return of the prodigal son” or “battle of Waterloo.” Since abstract art is not recognizable, its description can be long, but most of it is artistically irrelevant. It will be noticed if the artist misses an apostle in a “Last Supper,” but the existing difference between Agnes Martin’s *Untitled* (1962) and *Little Sister* (1962) is not easy to notice, at least online and ignoring the frame.

Does the frame matter? The [comments](#) to *Little Sister* (1962) are eye-opening.



Jackson Pollock, *Number 8* (fragment)



Lapis blue granite



Jackson Pollock, *Lucifer* (fragment)



Rouge de Roi (Rouge Antique) marble

Figure 6.2. Are the processes in the depths of the earth and the brain similar? They probably are.

This example illustrates the difficulty of defining complexity because Agnes Martin is **evidently** simple and Leonardo da Vinci is **evidently** more complex. If we notice that Martin repeats the same element many times, Kolmogorov’s definition looks valid, at least for modern art. This is why minimalists add intriguing but totally unrelated titles or scribbles to beef up the meager complexity. Damien Hirst seems to have all the beef in the world, but he still entitles his **shark in formaldehyde**, which is the exact description, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the*

Mind of Someone Living. Well, I am just mean with minimalists. Verily, art is one's mirror. But aren't they mean with art?

While regularity and repetition can be seen in nature, imperfection (variability, deviation from the mean) is the main sign of natural origin. "Imperfection" should be the very essence of art that has no norm and no rules, but, curiously, even such art has an unstoppable drive toward draping itself into a flag of some style, school, or platform.

But at least Jackson Pollock is anything but simple, isn't he?

Are Pollock's paintings realistic in view of their similarity to natural stones? I do not know how to answer this except by admitting "accidental realism." I see in them a **pattern** of partially ordered natural process. I also suspect that the use of textured marble, granite, and malachite for internal decoration responds to the same human attraction to ordered chaos that was met by Jackson Pollock the pioneer and by his epigones. What is undeniable, they evoke an emotional response. Clouds and stones do that as well. Pollock's beauty is richer because it is more complex, even though it uses the same pattern all over the canvas.



Figure 6.3. Natural (not man-designed) objects. Top: Man-assisted Rorschach inkblots. Middle: Celestial objects. Left to right: Helix, Horsehead, and Great Carina Nebulae (NASA photos). Bottom: Clouds.

The most common distinction of natural objects is that they lack the strict regularity of geometrical forms. For example, they do not have perfectly straight lines, curves along simple mathematical functions, and exact symmetry. Even the flowers described by botanists by "floral formulas" are unpredictable in their details and even snowflakes are never perfect. The Rorschach blots, although tainted by artificiality because they are symmetrical, are still hardly predictable. As for clouds and nebulae, **Figure 6.3**, they are, appropriate to say, God's blots to

test our personalities: are we capable of feeling beauty and awe of the world around us? I am feigning sentimentality.



Sigmar Polke [Untitled \(Rorschach\)](#), 1999.

The blots are man-made but not man-designed. Their shape, however restrained by symmetry, is to a significant degree random. They can be manipulated up to a point by preparing the original splash of ink before pressing both halves of the sheet together. Sigmar Polke, an adventurer and explorer (the party for which I will always vote in arts), did that in his experiments with Rorschach blots. What bars the nebulae and clouds from entry into an abstract art gallery is our knowledge of their non-human origin. However weird the shapes of most nebulae are, they cannot be arbitrary: order is present there, too.

The shapes of blots in our hands, nebulae in deep space, and clouds over the earth have some constraints. Constraints mean order. What is the source of order?

Words like natural, unplanned, and, especially, in this context, random invite a long and difficult discussion, but I, in a Zen-like manner, will simply show what I mean.

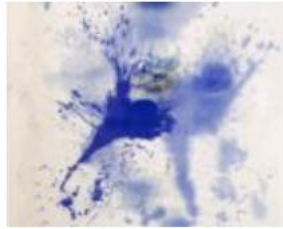


Figure 6.4. Quasi-nature and pseudo-Things

Left to right: [Jean Messagier](#) (1920-1999), *Apocalypse du printemps* ; [Hans Hoffman](#) (1880-1966) *Astral Nebula*; Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), *On White 2* and *Transverse Line*, both 1923.

In **Figure 6.4**, two left abstract nebulous pictures deliberately imitate nature, as their titles reveal. The two pictures of Wassily Kandinsky, on the right, although nebulously entitled, exemplify human artifice: straight line, smooth regular curves, and color fields within sharp borders. Somebody (myself, at least) can easily imagine the paintings as two-dimensional projections of arrays of strange but certainly man-made 3D objects piled up or spilled out on a flea market tarp. From this kind of painting a modern installation emerges, a curious hybrid of painting and sculpture, hauntingly realistic, sufficiently chaotic, and utterly irrational. With a live human as a component, sprinkled with theatre, it becomes performance art. But I have already written about that in ART AS MATTER.

I am coming back to **anchoring**. This happens when reality is unreal, too.

Figure 6.5 shows a brightened and sharpened up fragment of Andrea Mantegna's (1431-1506) *Agony in the Garden* side by side with the painting itself. I can recognize neither of them as realism. Is it because the content of the painting is mystical?

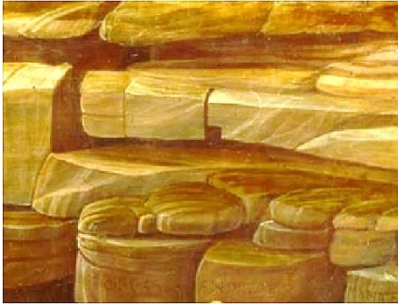


Figure 6.5. Is it realistic art? A brightened-up fragment (left) of *Agony in the Garden* (1453-1454) by Andrea Mantegna (right).

Mantegna's other paintings and frescoes often look like photos of sculpture or cardboard cutouts, which only elevates him among the old masters in the eyes of the modern ones. It looks like a modernist re-painting of a classical painting.

For a comparison, look at **Figure 6.6** that also represents the unreal.

The paintings in **Figure 6.6** depict scenes not only never observed but, from a rational point of view, as non-existent as Goya's monsters. Yet the images are realistic, even naturalistic, like a touched-up photo. In the painting of William-Adolph Bouguereau (1825-1905), the dead woman and the angels look like vigorous healthy humans. The wings of angels could be borrowed from a Victoria's Secret lingerie run. In Corrado Giaquinto's (1703 – 1765) painting of Heaven, Satan, wearing his little Halloween horns, is kneeling on a soft feather bed and looks as comfortable as everybody else in the company.



Figure 6.6. Super-realism or full-blooded nexistence?

Left to right: Corrado Giaquinto, *Satan before the Lord* (1750); William-Adolph Bouguereau, *Soul Carried to Heaven*, (1878); Bouguereau, *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (1850); Real fake wings and horns.

Bouguereau is so bound by reality that that he betrays Dante. He paints an episode from Dante's *Hell* ("one came to [Capocchio](#), and fixed his tusks in his neck," *Canti XXIX- XXX*) as a clutch of two healthy athletic bodies, but both sinners, Capocchio and Gianni Schicchi, the attacker, are supposed to be ill and covered by itching scabs "from head to foot."

The mythical imaginary world, never observable and scantily described in texts and legends, can be painted realistically, but it means abstraction from all its otherworldly properties that we believe in.

Only up to my knees deep in modern art, I began, surprisingly, to see less contrast between classical and modern, concrete and abstract, real and surreal. The perceptions of the same art by its contemporaries and later generation cannot be the same against different backgrounds of the past. This is why modernists discovered their predecessors in classics, as the trees of art in ART AS TREE will testify. After my further wandering in modern art, some classical artists, whom I always considered paragons of realism, suddenly began to reveal to me the blotches of coming avantgardosis. I was like a medical student who finds in himself symptoms of the disease he studies.

Is modernity modern? Is abstraction abstract? What is the difference between classical and modern art? I wonder if anybody has ever tried to analyze visual art from the position of structuralism, as it has been attempted in literature. Literature cannot be reduced to pixels, but image can. It means that art could be analyzed as it is, as an image without opinions, meanings, interpretations, background, mythology, and artspeak: just a matrix of pixels.

I know that literary styles could be computer-imitated. I do not know where it would bring us with art. I am just curious. [Here is a link](#), which is a look into the future of art. It is also the present of the art of modern CGI-boosted cinema.

Visual arts, beware computers: it is the second coming of photography. Will artists betray Kandinsky? Maybe. Warhol? Never.

Amazing...

7. ART AS TREE

Abstraction is the staple and the jewel of both art and mathematics. They are made for each other and they share the crown of imagination. Sometimes they even meet at an art gallery.



Figure 7.1. Left: [Fractal art of Jock Cooper](#), [image 1008111](#); right: Henri Rousseau, [The Equatorial Jungle](#) (1909)

Art is as concrete as matter can be even if it is abstract art. You can knock on it with your knuckles. What happens if we look at art in abstract way and try to paint the abstract picture of abstract or, for that matter, all art? Will it look as lackluster as the charts of Dow Jones or ARTNET, whatever Kandinsky wrote about the expressivity of a curved line³⁰ ?

³⁰ Investors seem to endorse Kandinsky's praise of the line. The stock chart can trigger emotions from gut fear to mad joy.

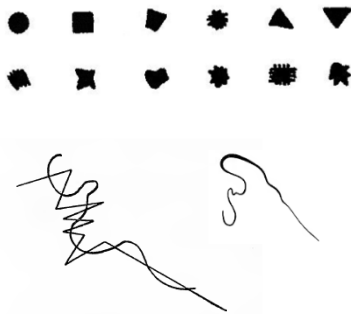
Abstraction is the job of mathematics, which turns everything, including products of pure imaginations, into clusters of abstract symbols and compositions of points, lines, planes, and breakneck surfaces that no skateboarder can brave.

The areas of mathematics that deal with lean abstract imagery of complex rich systems are graph theory, network topology, and, most importantly, Pattern Theory of Ulf Grenander. They, in a crude simplification, represent Everything as points connected with lines,³¹ but here I will not repeat what can be found in original works of Ulf Grenander and on my website spirospero.net.

Instead, I will look again into *Point and Line to Plane*,³² a short book by Wassily Kandinsky He proclaimed “points” (dots, spots, and small pictorial elements) and lines (curves of variable thickness) as basic primitive components of painting. Abstract painting, therefore, is a combination of “points” and “lines” served hot and cold, fried and frozen, mixed and pure. That book was the art’s counterpart of Martin Luther’s *95 Theses*.

I find philosophy and language of Kandinsky religious, otherworldly, and anti-materialistic. What followed in art looked like the opposite. The spread of abstraction has been compared to flood (some artspeakers) and fire (other artspeakers), but nobody was hurt in the free world, to which Russia has not yet ever belonged. Moreover, art has become insurance against both flood and fire—in both metaphorical and legal ways (ART AS MONEY, of course).

If the reader has not yet guessed, I am not a big fan of abstract art. Yet I confess that the sweep, intensity, and variety of Kandinsky’s own paintings are irresistible. The same qualities make me defenseless against the multifaceted Picasso. But I see Andy Warhol (who also left his written Analects, if not Theses) and other modern art saints as anti-Kandinsky’s counter-reformation. The worship of ordinary universally recognizable objects, like soup can, flag, dollar sign, polka dot pattern, and animal in formaldehyde is the triumph of materialism against any vestiges of idealism in art.



Points (above) and lines from Kandinsky's book

Kandinsky’s points and lines are **independent** elements meaning compact “static” non-directional spots (points) and drawn-out dynamic strokes (lines) that, combined with points, imply time, movement, and process. His plane is the bounded area where the points and lines reside, sending various emotive and spatial messages. The process of interpretation is essentially the same as divination on intestines, sooth, coffee dregs, and cards, only with their pictures rather than real things. An at random taken Kandinsky is as good as cards to predict where your current love or business affair will bring you. Card and palm readers have not yet discovered that.

What I mean by points and lines is something different.

³¹ See, for example, *History as Points and Lines* by Yuri Tarnopolsky and Ulf Grenander.

³² Available on the Web: https://openlibrary.org/books/OL6033439M/Point_and_line_to_plane and <https://archive.org/details/pointlinetoplane00kand>

I have a good, solid, newsworthy, not postmodern but—higher up—super-modern example of what I mean by points and lines: network.

Configurations (networks) of points (elementary components, “nodes”) and connecting lines (links, bonds) is exactly what the abovementioned mathematics is about. The points are neither geometrical points nor Kandinsky’s points but just anything that is or is not connected to another point: people, computers, words, species, institutions, bones, nations, and thoughts. Line is not a geometrical line but a pictorial symbol of connectedness, which can also be portrayed without lines: as a matrix. This is what mathematical abstraction means: no dichotomy between the object and representation. These features are fundamental part of Pattern Theory, but Ulf Grenander took further steps by attributing to abstract configurations such realistic properties as probability and energy. The theory is radical and not yet fully appreciated, probably, because sciences and humanities are still worlds apart in both paradigms and material rewards.

Ulf Grenander’s “points” (called *generators*) are somewhat close to chemical atoms but they have individuality and complexity, quite like real objects. The lines (called bond couples) are also similar to chemical bonds: they have energy: the measure of strength translatable into probability and back. There are stable configurations and improbable ones. My attempted contribution is another borrowing from chemistry: history and human relations are not just narratives and data but natural processes with beginning, transition state, and end. They redistribute the connections between points and so transform configurations. As chemistry can predict the most probable changes of structure, pattern chemistry might be a chance to foresee the future (as chemists and military commanders routinely do) without recurring to oracles and soothsayers. Do not expect market predictions, I wanted to say, but, on the second thought, who knows, maybe.

Network, the buzzword of our civilization, is a combination of points and lines connecting some or all of the points. Various patterns of connectivity (= topologies) are shown in **Figure 7.2** for computer networks in which computers are “points”.

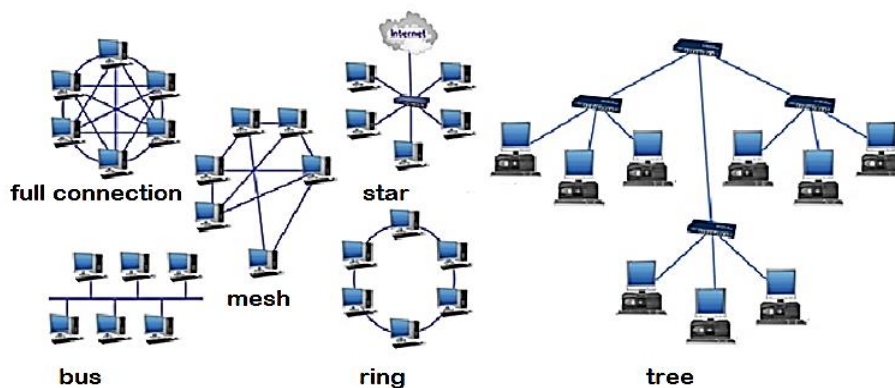


Figure 7.2. Network topologies for computers.

Culture, art, science, philosophy, politics has always been networks of communication, control, interaction, and influence. So are trade, manufacturing, and finances. Networking is a condition of personal social stability and advancement.

Art has a tree of its own. In 2012, the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) hosted the exhibition *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925*.

Map 1, **Figure 7.3A**, was created with the help of network specialists. It shows links of influence and personal contacts between the artists and cultural stars of that period. Thus, it includes the poet Apollinaire and dancer Nijinsky. The most important artists have the largest neighborhoods of “friends”. The amazing **interactive** (!) map places Wassily Kandinsky in the center of the entire abstractionist movement, which some enthusiasts called, testing the limits of artspeak, “our Renaissance.” The Web page shows also partial art maps, all looking like a chaotic tangle of labeled spots and, sometimes, labeled lines. They represent the personalities in the nodes of the network. The maps are complemented with biographies, comments, and graphic materials retrievable by clicking on the nodes. This is a real treasure. I list major links:

1. Art history charts

2. Main page

3. Interactive main network

4. Interactive individual networks

5. Main network, pdf

6. Text



The main art network is shown in **Figure 7.3A**, but it can be fully appreciated only on the MoMA web site. It has the topology of a dense mesh of stars.

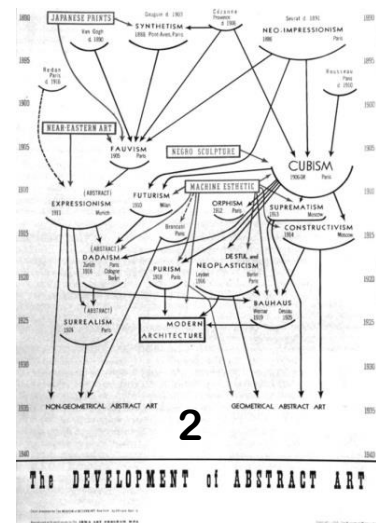
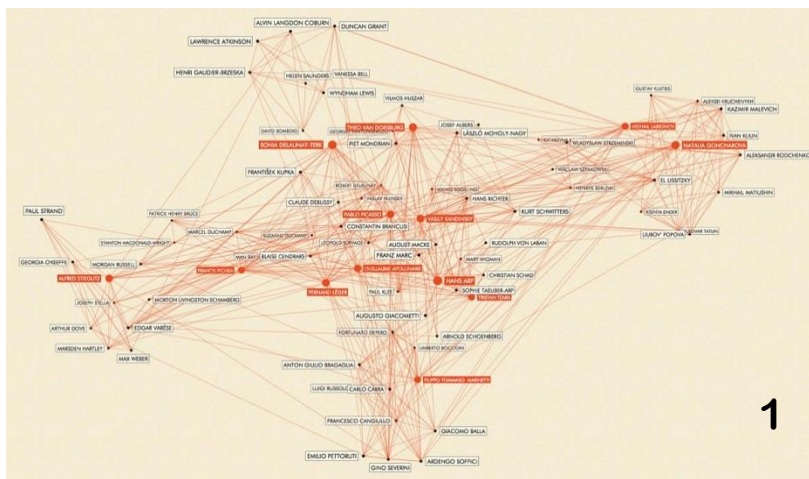


Figure 7.3A. Art maps, see [ARTNEWS, MOMA makes a FACEBOOK for abstractionists](#), by Robin Cembalest, 10/02/12. 1: MOMA's map; 2: Alfred Barr, 1936

The MoMA Grand Map of 2012 in “*Inventing Abstraction*” is not the only points-and-lines representation of art history as a network. The time component for it was not crucial because of the shortness of the period of flood and fire, but there were quite a few attempts to include time into the picture, as the right sides of **Figures 7.3 A** and **B** show. More art history charts could be found on the MoMA site and elsewhere, see **Figure 7.4**. Among them, the gracious tree of Lynn

Elliot Letterman, who devoted a branch to feminist art, and the super-complex tree of Greg Neville stand out. They, together with the most popular tree of Miguel Covarrubias, reflect some important **topological** distinction of art from life.

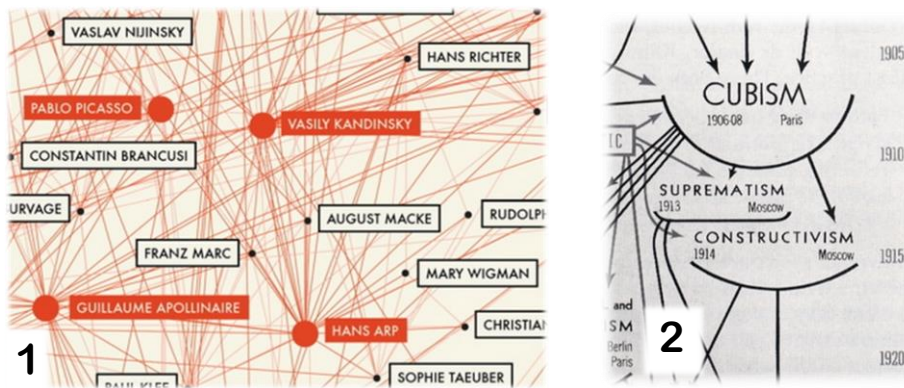


Figure 7.3B. Fragments of maps in Figure 7.3A.

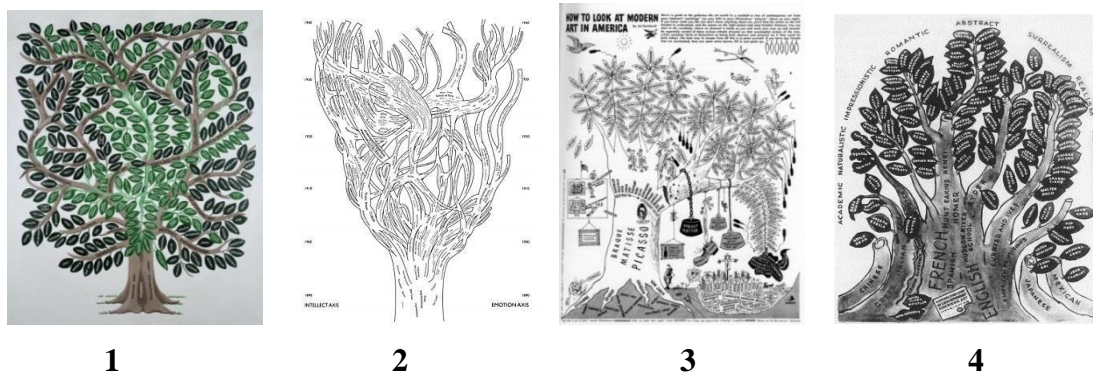


Figure 7.4. Modern art trees. Authors: 1. Lynn Elliot Letterman 2. Greg Neville, 3. Ad Reinhardt, 4. Richard Pousette-Dart. Sources: [1a](#), [1b](#), [2a](#), [2b](#), [3](#) and [4](#).

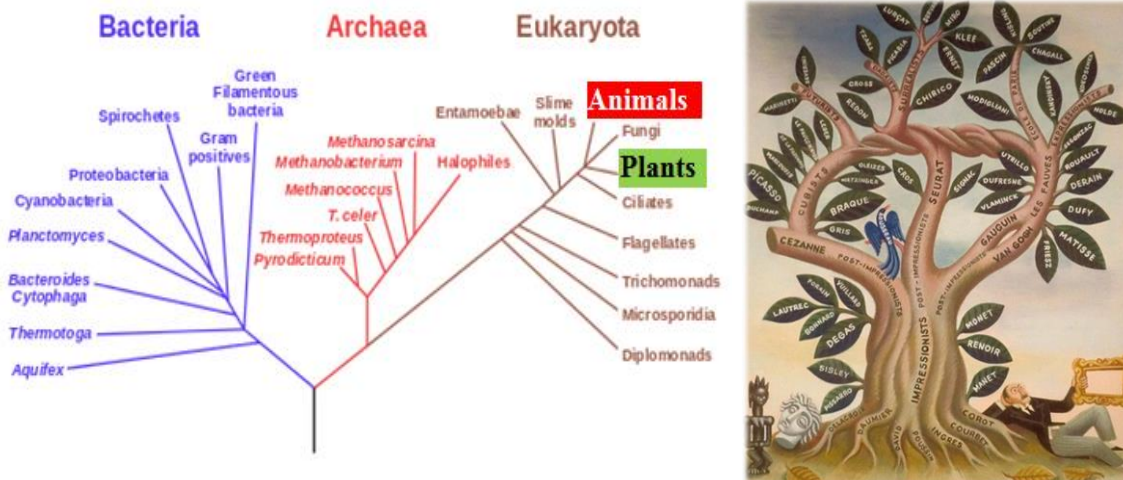


Figure 7.5. Left: Diverging tree of life; right: converging tree of modern art (by [Miguel Covarrubias](#), 1933)

Miguel Covarrubias put Henri Rousseau on the tree not as a leaf but as an exotic bird (**Figures 7.5 and 7.6**). I wholeheartedly agree with that. I think that Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), as a promise of fresh air, still belongs more to the future than to his contemporaries. The hyperrealism and fractal art (**Figure 7.1**) look, with hindsight, like his distant and unexpected progeny. It is hard to understand why the delicate Maurice Utrillo was placed among the stark fauvists, however. The consensus in attribution and interpretation of connections in art networks is hopelessly difficult to reach.



Figure 7.6. Fragments of pictures in Figure 7.5.

Tree is the standard representation of evolution of species and other systems with growing complexity. It is also used in linguistic analysis, genealogy, history of science, technology, institutions, philosophy, ideology, and any object with hierarchical structure, apart for drawing objects of botany. Artists, who are full-blooded humans, however abstract and skeletal in their creations, as well as biologists, who are at home in a tree-house, are charting their trees growing upward, trunk at the bottom. In linguistics, they are upside down.

It turns out that the evolutionary trees of art do not have the pure tree topology, which requires the absence of rings. Their tangled networks combine rings with strict branching of tree topology.



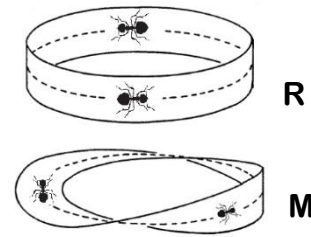
What does it tell us? Topology, unlike “network,” is not a buzzword today, maybe, for a good reason, but change in topology is one of the most profound changes that can happen in the world. It does not happen every century and not even every millennium.³³ We are right in the middle of a topological revolution and I am going to allow myself a digression about the new topology of our good old round world, already with tentacles into the space.

I have been fascinated by topology since my school years.

Topology is a property of space, whether discrete, like network, or continuous, like our earthly habitat or something we can only imagine. The most popular illustration is the Moebius strip which everybody can make from a strip of paper.

³³ I would say, it happened only once before with the emergence of human brain in which anything could be connected with anything else. Will the future world need of humans as dumb as neurons? Joseph Stalin praised humans as dumb as, I quote, “little screws” (винтики). Will art need only minimalists? They will be easy to recombine.

Two ants on the opposite—inner and outer—sides of a ring can never meet without crossing the border between them. On the Moebius strip, however, two ants are always on the same side and can communicate and procreate day and night. This is like Europe and America before the Age of Discovery: the two continents were on the opposite sides of the communication border. The Industrial revolution put all humans on the Moebius strip of knowledge and physical contact. Yet we were still separated by borders (never perfect) and distance (never impenetrable) from total **mutual** manipulation and control. The Digital Revolution has thrown us all into the borderless world because the increasing part of our personal existence has been taking the eerie dematerialized digital form.



Ring (R) and Moebius strip (M)

Dematerialization is an ugly word, but I expect it to buzz like a heavy metal band in near future. It is the main problem of the Digital Age. Its Google output today is only 347,000 results (0.57 seconds). For the times when it exceeds one million, I suggest the term “demat.” Remember me then.

Let us open the phonebook, like the one that is being delivered to my mailbox—newspapers are



not anymore—but sits for a year unopened on top of the fridge. The phone company maintains its network of subscribers with **potentially** full connection topology. The subscribers listed on its White Pages consist of three kinds: (A) those who know about each other’s existence and have communicated at least once, (B) those who have never called each other but know about the other from the phonebook and would call in need, and (C), those who would never call one another except by mistake. This distribution changes with time: “never say never.” Of course, I neither know nor want to know who is who in the entire book, but the telephone company in principle can find out from their digital records. Although hardly used, this knowledge exists openly and is of acute interest in matters of national security.

I cannot resist an urge to quote Michel Houellebecq as evidence that topology begins to slowly trickle into literary fiction, although this particular piece of fiction is chillingly realistic.

Think of an X-Y graph, Rediger wrote, with individuals (points) linked according to their personal relationships: it is impossible to construct a graph in which each individual is linked to every other. The only solution is to create a higher plane, containing on point called God, to which all of the individuals can be linked—and linked to one another, through an intermediary.³⁴

Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY 2015, p. 224.

It is the **existence of the directory**, whether on paper or in computer memory, that makes us all **potentially** connected, but there is no way to know the **actual** connectivity of any network unless somebody studies it by spying or the network itself keeps the records and discloses it. The telephone company lets me know only my contacts, i.e., my neighborhood of connectivity, in which **I am a star**. We cannot know people with whom we are not connected in any way, but the directory manages to **potentially**



³⁴ It is possible to construct such a graph of full connection, but impossible to realize it on a large scale. What the author suggests is the star connection.

connect us anyway.³⁵ What seems so meaningful to me is the absolute ubiquity and availability of **recorded** or **recordable** network data. This is the historical computer-generated novelty of modern civilization. Our souls and pockets can **potentially** be open to each other and those who watch us from afar. As for “points called gods,” they are as real as you and I, but their plane is too high for this Essay. Our very existence, that we are dying to make known to the world, can be our major point of vulnerability if it is known. What has that to do with art? I will come to that in the very end.

I have no reason to believe that my cable connectivity provider uses my meagre data for anything but its business and outrageously expensive billing. Unlike many people, I also understand that absolute privacy can have very high cost in the era of terrorism.

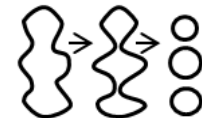
The situation is different with the enormous connectivity in the web of smart phones, Internet, and social media networks like Facebook and Google, which connect not only people with people, but also people with ideas, images, Things for sale, companies that offer them, scammers, hackers, and propaganda, stealing enormous amount of personal time—the only truly irreplaceable asset on this planet and in our lives. My **Essay 2: On the chronophages or time-eaters** was about that. Social media potentially connect everything in the Knot: **humans** (including their secret desires and thoughts), **Things**, and **ideas**, to which disinformation and nexistence belong, too.



I am not going to explore this subject any further. It is complicated (1) on its own, (2) because of connectivity to Government, (3) because of storing and exploiting the private data by the private companies, which makes privacy nonexistent, and (4) subversive connectivity between humans, companies, nations, and their enemies. This nervous system of the self-tightening Knot is still in development and the Internet of Things promises to tighten it another few notches.

The Knot of [Essay 59](#)

The converging and circular networks are possible in human non-biological evolution because all their points exist in memory like all telephone subscribers exist in a telephone book, whether linked or not. This is the most important property of both human mind and computer which makes them to a significant degree, if not completely, potentially interchangeable. Humans and their creations are calling each other regardless of time, distance, and acquaintance. More importantly, humans have always remembered their history, real or mythical. With outsourcing history to computers, our past, present, and future can fall on three disjointed surfaces, (like three different balls) which is not as surreal as it sounds. It was described in some detail by George Orwell and made reality, for a while, in Soviet Russia.



I end here my digression with a clarification. I see the development of the current total connectivity as the unintended and uninterpretable in its time “prophesy” of modern art in the beginning of the 20th century. This is the central idea of this Essay.

³⁵ This is a very strange thing called data. The descendant of knowledge, it is the essential facet of modernity. If knowledge is your personal power, already equalized by the Web, data is the power of somebody else over you because you do not have free access to it. This is why it can be used for national security as well as insecurity.

By no means should this Essay be regarded as attack on modern art. I chuckle at *Untitled, 1962*, but modern art is a vast reservoir of freedom, even if canned and labeled “Campbell Soup.” It is the opposite of what I loathe most in life.

Next, I am going to consider a different kind of a configuration with tree topology, this time about the substance of art as art. As a template, in **Figure 7.7**, I supply the tree of life with its root system never seen on such trees simply because we do not know much about the origin of

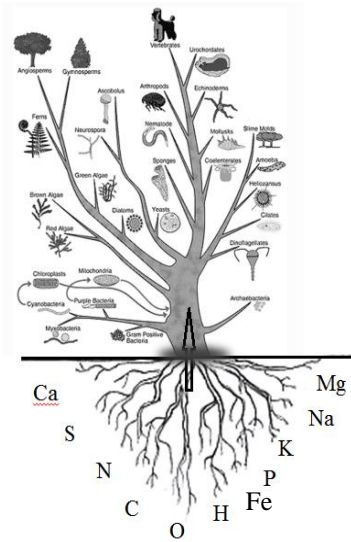


Figure 7.7. Tree of life with roots.

life. We know, however, that all living matter consists of a limited set of atoms and every molecule in organism is just a combination of atoms. The tree of life is a record of evolving complexity of such combinations. Then what is art as artwork and not as network of personal relations? What are its atoms and molecules? This question is what unites Kandinsky’s points and lines with points and lines of Pattern Theory.

Modern art, unlike classical art, is not constrained by the object even in photography. It freely combines elements of reality and imagination, as well as appropriated tricks of other artists. It makes new elements and combinations, transforming the old ones.

Next, I will show yet another type of art tree: the impersonal one: the tree of styles. I will arrange it along the axis not of time but of complexity. I want to show not only how different the tree of art is, but also the consequence of this difference.

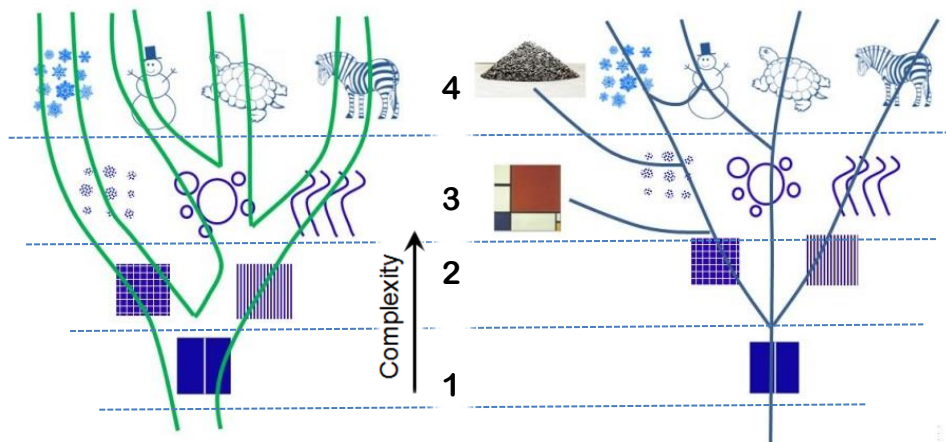


Figure 7.8. The tree of complexity

The left part of **Figure 7.8** has in its root (Level 1) Barnett Newman’s *Onement VI*, a picture of extreme simplicity. Consisting of a blue field and white “zip”, it opens a way to multiplication and recombination of white lines at Level 2. The lines begin to deform at Level 3, kept in shape by external constraints of snowflakes, turtle, and waves. At Level 4, the primitive pictures acquire more complexity and realism. The closeness of the snowflakes to the pre-turtle makes possible, do not ask me how, the split of the turtle into the snowman and the definite turtle. The tree of complexity grows under the constraints of reality. The right part of the **Figure 7.8** adds

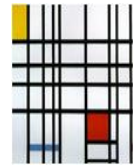
new paths of evolution toward modern art. We see two iconic pieces: the pile and the grid of Piet Mondrian, each preserving some components of their neighbors: orthogonal grid at Level 2 and particulate consistency of snow. In the evolution of modern art, ideas are freely interbreeding with natural objects.

What I omit in the **Figure 7.8** is the long road from the primitive art through millennia and the hard toil of classical art toward becoming modern primitivism and minimalism.

The tree of complexity and sophistication is tangled. One could say that minimalism in art is similar to the minimalism of simple organisms, the germs that successfully coexist with humans. But the germs, fungi, and microscopic algae have been developing uninterrupted, while abstract art and the barrage of pop cans just fell from the skies after the ages of sophistication.



What does the prophetic art want to tell us? Is our civilization secretly exploring the ways toward the rectangular order of Mondrian-colored prison bars and windows? I will leave the question hanging in the air. I do not have either a consistent theory or sufficient material or just remaining time to think about it. Life is short.



To conclude this difficult monologue, I offer a visual parable of the current topology of art as a reformed tree, **Figure 7.9**. The topology of our art—and, I believe, of our civilization—is moving to **full connection**. Anything can be anything else and mixed with anything. Anything goes. Anything is there in the phone book/Google, just call/click on a whim. Anything but money is on a plate. Everybody and everything wears a mask and to trust the appearance and rely on promise is a risky game. It is the world of submission to order.

Art, science, technology, culture, and everything created by humans has been evolving like a tree by divergence and specialization, similarly to the evolution of living species. In our time, however, human creations and even living species are acquiring a new freedom of intercourse or repulsion between themselves. They fuse and grow cycles. The reservoir of freedom is bursting at the seams.

Everything influences and interacts with anything else. This creates a real mess in our age of artificiality in which humans, the pure product of natural evolution, have to mate with their own artifice.

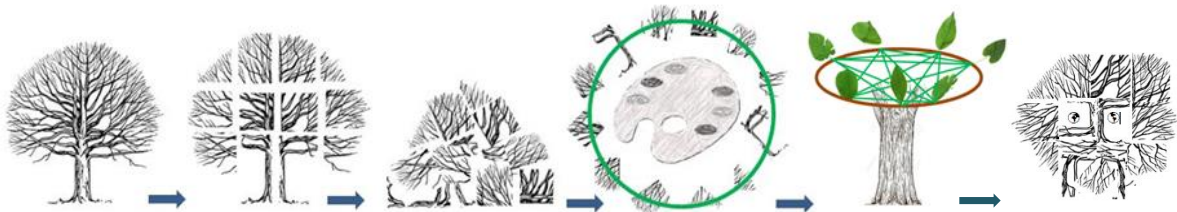


Figure 7.9. Reforming the tree of art

The watch is mating with computer, tomato with jellyfish, France blends with North Africa (creating huge tectonic tensions), and the Frankensteinian mix of theater, installation, artist, torture, nudity, and public in performance art is drawing crowds³⁶. The diverging tree of civilization begins to converge, as if the branches of an oak started to fuse with each other. Ideas and social structures mix, too. We are witnessing the ultimate barbarity of bygone millennia coexisting today with the refinement of elites, glamor of Paris, entrenchment of liberalism, and the oxymoronic **anarchic conservatism** of the Republican Party in US.

I have to stop and change topic before I begin to question the prospects of a reformation of life along the pattern of the Reformation of art with its artspeak and eerie art market.

³⁶ Marina Abramovic at MOMA, 2010

8. ART AS SHADOW

My primary assumption in this Essay is that art is an *exsystem*: evolving complex system. So are life on earth, society, its culture, institutions, and knowledge. Larger exsystems can have smaller sub-exsystems and modern art is a sub-exsystem of culture and economy where both overlap, keeping politics at safe distance.

Exsystem is a realm of individuality, while physics is, traditionally, a realm of generality. Chemistry, for which each of countless chemical structures is unlike all the others, feels at home with human individuality and needs only the generality of physics to bridge human matters with the rest of the universe, inhabited or not.

I want to look at art from a very general point of view in order to understand what happened when classical art had entered its modern stage, which is now already historically old. At the same time, I expect art to reveal to me something I do not know about the larger exsystem that incorporates it. I believe that all exsystems have some important properties in common, which is to say that they share some patterns. This idea is not quite new. Thus, evolution of technology and evolution of life are topologically similar processes. They are represented by the same tree-like maps. This is a big and complex area, however, and I will not go there in this Essay. There is more about it on my [COMPLEXITY](#) site.

Next, I am going to explore, three-quarter-seriously, the origin of imagination by exerting my own imagination. I want to imagine myself a troglodyte, a cave dweller, one foot in the cave, the other in today. I see nexistence as the product of imagination that somehow is capable of evolving into a mass belief that moves individuals, couples, dozens, hundreds, and millions of people with hardly predictable but *post factum* explainable results. I separate dozens and hundreds from millions because the millions are usually put into action by small groups created by individuals. Modern art, unlike other spheres of human activity, does not enthrall many millions of people (pop arts do), but it keeps an avid eye on millions, anyway, as any industry does.

Since E. B. Tylor (1832 – 1917), anthropologists noted the possible role of dreams in the origin of religious ideas.

Dreams are not a good object to choose as a counterpart of reality. They have realistic visual details of “this world”, are uncontrollable, inconsistent, overall senseless, poorly remembered, and occurring only for a short time in specific circumstances of our life. Their content is limited. They are shredded, spliced, and distorted visions of day life, composed of convincing fragments and sometimes stories (have I just formulated the essence of all postmodernity?). Dreams are passive and spontaneous, while imagination is active and controlled.

I cannot argue with the power of dreams in human life, especially in past centuries. Instead, I want to draw attention to something more common and universal: the dichotomy between real and imaginary that goes through the history of art. One can say that Jackson Pollock's drip technique is fully spontaneous and has nothing to do with imagination, but Pollock definitely controlled the gradually developing picture, selection of paint, and the endpoint.

Taking to account the *unimaginable* craziness of modern art, there could have already been an artist who painted with his eyes closed. If not, there will be one.

And now let us jump not just centuries but 20,000 years (the age of the Lascaux cave pictures) back in time.

I am a Stone Age human with some emerging capacity of speech. My cave name is Ogg.

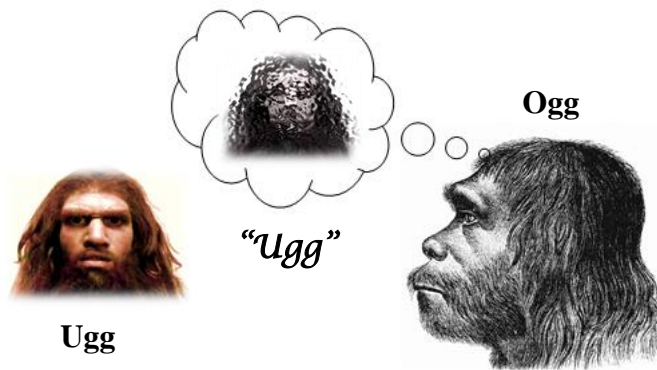


Figure 8.1. The two worlds of the first humans.

In **Figure 8.1**, I show my selfie and the shot of my good-looking pack mate and rival Ugg.³⁷ I look neat enough in my picture, but Ugg is really unkempt. If I look like a daydreamer, it is because I am. I will still be a daydreamer 20,000 years later.

There is a second image of Ugg, of a much poorer quality. Because it is always with me, I conclude that it is in my head, but I am not certain. I cannot look into my head. There is nothing but

brains in cracked heads of other people.

The process of becoming human brought about a great complication in the work of the mammalian brain. The rest of human evolution until very recently has been spent in adaptation—ultimately, successful—to the duality of human existence tossed and torn between the real and imaginary. Man-made ideas and idea-made men created the third loop of the Knot: man-made Things.

I perceive all existing Things and life forms in two different modes. One is the mode of direct perception, WYSIWYG (*What You See Is What You Get*), or, better, WIGIWIS, *What I Get Is What I See*, i.e., I see Ugg. He is right there, I can touch him, and his presence creates his image.

The other mode is WISIWIT, *What I See Is What I Think*: I see Ugg in my imagination, with closed eyes, in other words, **I think about him**. **My mind**, not Ugg's actual presence, creates his image. Although it is **my** mind, I have some limited control over it, which I share with instincts. They are more powerful. I still do not have any power competing with my animal instincts except for the similar instincts of others like myself. Quite often, we get physical. By way of understatement, this is called healthy competition.

³⁷ I have no idea why all artists portray early people as wildly disheveled, untidy, and menacing brutes. Even animals take care of themselves and groom each other.

My daytime eyes-shut mental image of Ugg is not the same as the eyes-open one. It is more like a *shadow*. It has few, if any, details, none of them exact. Although I can see the *shadow* of the wart on Ugg's nose if I want, I never pay attention to the color of his eyes because we all have the same color. I can see Ugg from behind, running, or lying on his back, yelling or growling, eating or hunting. I can even see him dead, although he is enviably healthy. I *know* that it is Ugg. The *shadows*³⁸ of other pack members are different, but have similar properties.



Figure 8.2. Ugg (below) and I at the tomorrow's hunt.

There is something else in my head when I close my eyes: words. I can hear them ears-open or ears-shut, quite like the *shadows*. I hear them and I can play with them a little even before I speak. I can say Ugg's name and call him when he is out of my view, behind a bush or a rock. I can also imagine (i.e., see its *shadow*) an antelope and even paint its *shadow* on the wall of the cave, appropriately arranged with other *shadows*. I can imagine an antelope killed by Ugg, although I do not see the act of hunt and the jubilant Ugg himself laying a new arrow on his bow. If Ugg was indeed dead, I would see his *shadow* same way as I see the *shadow* of Ughh, his younger brother who has been already two moons dead after being hugged by a bear.

Now I am switching back to my real self (one foot still in the cave because I want you to meet somebody else there). To my surprise, my thought experiment has shown me that the most dramatic difference between Ogg and me is a larger vocabulary and ability to read, which is not that much.

Here or there, I find myself in two distinct worlds—something Emile Durkheim (his wild look is deceiving) is considered the beginning of any religion. My and Ogg's two worlds are (1) reality—the close and explored environment of my clan—and (2) the *shadows* of reality in my head.



**This is Aggie
remixed
by Picasso**

I, Ogg, begin to perceive **reality** as consisting of combinatory elements such as head or leg of the antelope, rain or shine from the skies, and my hunting mate Ugg or my sex mate Aggie, here she is, dear.

The combinations are not chaotic and I begin to understand what keeps them in shape: the constraints of the patterns. The leg cannot grow from the head, rain never goes up toward the skies, and Aggie's portrait by Picasso is sick offensive slander. The origin of Picasso's art is even darker than the origin of religion and you really need to believe in something out of this corporeal world to consider it art. I need a mediator—an art critic, an art investment advisor, a priest in the temple of Muses—to reconcile me with it. I am intentionally confused, playing Hamlet.

³⁸ The term *image* is already taken by Pattern Theory as well as other sciences and arts.

The real world requires knowledge and, ultimately, science. I do not have any power over the laws of nature, but I can use them. I trust my senses. I can connect the cause and effect. The lightning causes thunder. Gravity and wind direct rain. I observe and take a note of regularity. I dive into the world of *shadows* to fish for hypotheses and generalizations. I begin to distinguish between opinion and fact. The root of knowledge is bitter, the road to understanding is long, and life is short. My descendants' power over nature and man-made Things will possibly grow for the next 20100 years, but human power over humans will always be limited and shaky (written during the US Government shutdown by the tribe of cave Republicans in 2013).

In the world of *shadows*, I have a different kind of power (I can, for example, make Democrats win in 2016).

I begin to perceive the **shadows** as consisting of combinatory elements such as head or leg of the antelope, rain or shine from the skies, and my hunting mate Ugg, and my sex mate Aggie (who has some fabulous non-combinatory elements of her own). In my *shadows*, a leg can grow from the head. Why not?

The combinations are sometimes chaotic, but the *shadows* differ from *reality*. They have much less constraints, more freedom to divide, splice, and recombine. The **laws** of *shadows* are much looser than the laws of nature. I have a lot of power over them. Thus, although Aggie is mine, I can see *shadows* of Ugg mating with Aggie, and that does something to me, and I see the *shadow* of Ugg killed with the *shadow* of my arrow, and I feel good, although Ugg is still alive and well, (and this is the beginning of literary fiction).

Moreover, I see the *shadow* of triumphant Ugg over the *shadow* of my dead body. This is what it means: **I see the world not only as it is, but also as it can be or even cannot be.** And if all humans have two eyes, it is no problem for me to imagine and paint somebody with one eye in the forehead, or with goat's legs, or fused with a horse. And I begin to think that I am too hard on Picasso and his Aggie is a masterpiece, anyway. Along the road of *shadows* we can create images eyes-shut and we have to look out into the sunshine to see what is real. But how do we know what is **not** real?

My **ideas** (let us finally, 20,000 years later, use this word instead of *shadows*) consist of elements that can be combined and recombined along rules, but not necessarily the rules of the nature. Moreover, my first sounds can be combined and recombined into words and statements, not necessarily having anything in common with reality or making sense at all. To dream is as human as to err and to err is the usual price of dreaming.

There is the third world: instincts inherited from animals. Let us call it human nature. I put it side by side with nature because they rule over all animals, although its laws are not as powerful as the laws of inanimate nature. There is a long way from instincts to "a system of rules and guidelines which are enforced through social institutions to govern behavior" ([Law](#) in Wikipedia). This system can be etched in stone or stacked on sheets of paper, but humans like to violate it in any form if it makes them feel good.

The mental images—configurations produced by imagination—harbor everything "non-natural." There is a small semantic distance between non-natural, i.e., not observable in nature, and such

potent religious notions as supernatural and unnatural. This is the area of a logical twilight where all cats are gray. If the supernatural exists, even invisibly, it is natural, and if we see something unnatural, it is natural, too. Otherwise, we would not see it. The supernatural is worshipped while unnatural is persecuted. The lack of logical basis under both notions leaves an ample leeway for the evolution of moral standards.

Back in the present, I am coming to the summary of my cave experience.

Humans imagine **new** ideas and test them against the **facts of nature**, which is the environment of the tribe. The ideas that do not contradict reality will survive. This process will produce science—the search for truth, constancy, and causality. Thus, if the earth looks flat, it is flat until proven curved.³⁹ The change that makes knowledge **stable enough** (not necessarily much more stable) will survive. Science is concerned with nature and consensus. Inanimate nature moves toward equilibrium. Animate nature is in a perpetual dance.

Humans imagine **new** ideas and test them against other humans, i.e., the **facts of human nature**. Some survive and stay as the laws of the tribe for as long as the tribe is stable. This route leads to culture. Change that makes the culture **stable enough** will survive. The culture that makes society **stable enough** (not necessarily **more** stable) will survive, until mortally wounded or naturally exhausted in fight with another culture. Culture is concerned with human matters and social order. Society is full of internal contradictions. In the knot of conflicting and contradicting strands of comparable power, the ideas, Things, and humans compete within and across the borders of these three domains. The more freedom, the less separating distance, the more chance of conflict, as the beginning of the third millennium testifies, as if the previous century was not enough.

Human produce **new** ideas and test them against **old ideas**. This is art: the creativity without utility (except luring a mate or a buyer). The most supernatural thing about art is that new piece just adds to the collection of old pieces (immortality?) and, paradoxically, its monetary value increases with age.

Modern art is based on the belief that it is art: a thing of value without utility and consensual meaning, assigned to its own marketplace and place of rest. And if it is created, displayed, and sold as art, it is art. Just believe me.

³⁹ I do not know what to make of the fact that, although President Obama's American citizenship is proven, it is still denied by many. My guess is that (1) denial is a form of belief and (2) the roots of beliefs are as much in the instincts as the roots of the teeth are in the jawbones. That's a pity because reason dwells just a little above the jaws. See the X-ray of a tooth in ART AS BELIEF.

9. ART AS BELIEF

In our times, the word “revolution” is slapped right and left on any new product, technology, treatment, and self-help with cries “Disruptive!” or “It will change your life!” This is what revolution is about. Revolution often changes one set of restrictions for another, however.

I suppose that the revolutionaries are those who are capable of coming to terms with the brutality of the world, and of responding to it with increased brutality.”⁴⁰ (Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, Vintage International, 2007, p. 109).

This is why I prefer the word “Reformation” for the beginnings of modern art. Reformation can relax or reject the constraints and I use the term in this sense. But the term inadvertently evokes religion.

Reform Judaism is an attractive example of relaxation, but religion is a complicated and sensitive subject. If I may put it in the same paragraph with religion, sexual revolution it is another example. It has already morphed into the initially non-intended relaxation of marriage and treatment of sexual minorities, although a one-way bombardment by anarcho-conservatives is still going on.



**Marc Quinn,
Self. Artist's
frozen blood.
(1991-...)**

Like the European religious and modern wars that had ended, recently, with peace, coexistence, and increased diversity in Europe, the Reformation in art did the same without a shot, although not without some blood spilled... Relax! Blood in art is only medium or component. Check out: [Body fluids in art](#) (Wikipedia) and look up [Marc Quinn's Self](#), which he refreshes up every five years.

As Sarah Sze's [Triple Point \(2013\)](#)⁴¹ shattered my outdated vision of modern art, the public seemed to be roused, too. I ran into the following theory of [Paddy Johnson](#), an insightful and, on that occasion, skeptical art writer:

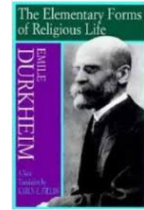
My theory is this: The show is both a production-site and graveyard for the relics of an unnamed religion. Members of this cult worship reproduction technology and mass-produced items of any form ([Paddy Johnson](#) ; she also finds that it “looks a lot like contemporary life.” *Brava!*).

⁴⁰ Houellebecq keeps modern art in the focus of his “*The Map and the Territory*,” (2012), which, as well as his *Submission* (2015), I find groundbreaking.

⁴¹ See also: [A](#), [B](#), and [C](#). Photo shots from multiple points at Flickr ([C](#)) give the best representation of 3D objects.

That was the moment when I decided to retrieve Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*⁴² from the back stacks of my bookshelves.

I had bought Durkheim's book long ago for \$3.99 at a book sale but was never able to read more than two first chapters. Only when I, jolted by *Triple Point*, had made another, more successful, effort, I understood that it should be read backwards, starting with *Conclusion* and, maybe, stopping after that.



Nexistential promises and threats.

I think that what **modern** art, **modern** ideology, and **modern** religion have in common, apart from being **organized**, is *nexistence*. I am not going as far as to generalize over *contemporary life*, however, despite of strong temptation, because we have two divergent subspecies in the postmodern *Homo sapiens* with contrasting existence, as well as *nexistence*. Paradise, hell, salvation, Nirvana, immortality, “chicken in every pot,”⁴³ million bucks overnight, Communism, Putinism, Trumpism, world domination, debt, insurance, market games,

security, and the combusive tea of the Tea-Party zealots—all that consists of promises and threats, all of them about the future.

Nexistence—the content of a socially powerful statement without evidence and proof, **nothing treated as something**—trails behind an artwork in the form of comments, analysis, comparison, evaluation, explanation, and interpretation. Unlike the nutritional value of a new sandwich or the magic abilities of the next iPhone, it is impossible to check whether the comments make any sense. There is no universally recognized connection between what we see and what we read and hear.

Nexistence is a necessary source of order for human society because nature has no laws for such unruly objects as humans. They are capable of creating novelty, which disobeys algorithms, laws, and the body of knowledge. Throughout the universe, nature prefers to bar the lawless novelty from entry into the world by keeping the immutable laws of nature on the book—unsuccessfully, as I submit, in case of humans. The only law that nature can offer humans is death and we are not happy about that, fighting nature with arts and other long lasting stuff—a kind of pillow fight because nothing lasts long in our time, especially if digitalized.



All human matters—at home, at work, in temple, or on Wall Street—involve belief, which, alloyed with doubt, trust, and desire, is a driver of human behavior.

Belief is what pulls people together in crowds and pits them against each other in fights.

⁴² Originally published in 1912. Translation by Karen E. Fields, The Free Press, 1995

⁴³ “A chicken in every pot” was promised by Henry IV of France, Catherine the Great of Russia, and Herbert Hoover of the U.S.

Reason needs to believe in itself in order to overpower a false belief. Two incompatible beliefs can play seesaw.⁴⁴



We can believe in tomorrow's rain and believe that global warming is nonsense. While attending temple, performing rituals, and choosing martyrdom are verifiable **facts** of behavior, an individual **belief** is not verifiable because of the non-yet-existing future as its constituent. Moreover, a declaration of belief can be simply an expression of the current mood, state of mind, calculation, and intent. Trusting a promise, or dreading a punishment can mean a different, belief, deeper hidden, with roots in personal history.

The breakup of a link between the image (fact) and its meaning (idea) is the essence of the Reformation of art. The modern artwork and its "understanding" or "meaning" are in different universes. Image is shared but its perception is individual, quite like political statement, and this is why politics is a genre of performance art.



Figure 9.1. Going in circles. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Circle*, 1913; Ellsworth Kelly, *Circle line*, 1951; Ives Klein, *Disque bleu*, 1957; Jiro Yoshihara, *Work*, 1967; Richard Pousette-Dart, *Black Circle, Time*, 1980; Richard Serra, *Coltrain*, 1999, and Billie Holiday, 1999.

An abstract painting is a canvas with a distribution of "lines and points," some of them recognizable, but its interpretation in plain language or artspeak has no logical or semantic connection with the material reality. You can only believe in something **beyond the appearance** of a simplest circle. Your belief is personal, subjective, and it may not agree with beliefs of the artist and others. Seven circles in **Figure 9.1** (a small part of all [painted circles](#)) are another illustration to the problem of degeneracy of form as well as disintegration and dispersion of meaning. Of course, there is nothing in the tenets of modern art that requires meaning, but artspeak needs something for a subject; not the weather, really.

THE SHOW IS OVER
ER THE AUDIE
NCE GET UPTOL
EAVE THE IRSE
ATS TIME TO C
OLLECT THEIR
COATS AND GO
OME THEY TUR
N AROUND NOM
ORE COATS AN
DNOMORE HOME

Christopher Wool
(b.1955), *Untitled*,
1990.

In postmodern art, you do not need either to believe in anything, to feel something, or just to believe that you feel. To say that you *believe that you feel* is more than enough. I see in this only a cause for celebration because you, the viewer, are entitled to the same degree of freedom as the artist: the freedom of irrelevance. But I hear the gong calling for my mantra: art is what is called, displayed, feigned, played, celebrated, praised, extolled, enjoyed, loved, criticized, ridiculed, hated, and sold as art.

⁴⁴ Tamar Szabó Gendler developed a concept of *alief*, a counteracting instinctive satellite of belief, but I mean cognitive dissonance.

The difference between image and meaning is erased in the genre of “word art,” an astronomically distant relative of Chinese calligraphy, exemplified by Christopher Wool’s *Untitled*, 1990.

THE SHOW IS OVER highlights what for Wool were the relevant questions for a young painter at the edge of postmodernism: could there still be meaning in the act of painting? The answer is at first ‘No’ and then perhaps ‘Yes’; the work inspires a continual debate within itself. In this iconic work, Wool questions as he celebrates the tension between act and image, high art and the simulacrum of the real. ([Auction comments](#)).

Abstract art as *nexistence* echoes another *nexistence*: the future, which is, being the heart of any religion and ideology, is a matter of belief but not a matter of fact.

Belief-doubt-trust is the rock-paper-scissors game of modern culture.

Exactly because modern art is elitist, like anything in the shadow of wealth, it has the highest potential to stay away from the pressure of the crowds and carry a sincere, though cryptic, message about something concerning our civilization.

The succinct *Conclusion* of Durkheim’s large volume is rather independent from the entire second-hand and often arbitrary or erroneous bulk of his book about tribal rites of Australian aborigines whom he had never faced. While reading the *Conclusion*, it occurred to me that it is applicable to a much larger area of human matters not necessarily associated with religion: collective—shared by hundreds or millions—beliefs.

Humans need beliefs as a map in wilderness, and it does not matter of what kind, as long as it makes them happy or scared. We sniff each other over for beliefs. An alien smell is discomforting for most, while the familiar one soothes the anxiety. Collective beliefs maintained by institutions are both glue and solvent of society: they unite and separate the human molecules and so keep social chemistry—or, if somebody prefers, machine—going.

NOTE: I believe that belief, when proof and science are non-existing or unavailable, **is** science. Religion, therefore, was the first form of natural science. It had no alternative. Then why people sinned? Because they saw that their experiments with sin were inconclusive. They still are.

Durkheim does not use anything like *nexistence* in his terminology. He divides everything that humans deal with into two different domains: sacred and profane. Spirits, gods or God, Greek *eidola*⁴⁵, dead ancestors, demons, soul, taboos, and anything where an individual has no choice belong to the realm of the sacred. Are objects of political correction sacred or profane? Decide for yourself.

Durkheim’s idea was that the sacred **beliefs** acquire their powerful organizing and uniting status because of the unconditionally believable **facts**: man-made visible and touchable paraphernalia, totems, images, narratives, art, rituals, taboos, and other tangent and transferable things existing

⁴⁵ In ancient Greek literature, an **eidolon** (plural: **eidola**) (Greek εἶδωλον: "image, idol, double, apparition, phantom, ghost") is a spirit-image of a living or dead person; a shade or phantom look-alike of the human form. ([Wikipedia](#))

in time and space. As abstract art is instinctively anchored in reality, religious beliefs seem to be anchored in **art** of religious rituals.

The passionate belief is usually expressed in the flamboyant, forceful, and effervescent speech which itself is a form of art. You can get elated, but to take it seriously, you need to believe in what it says.

The so super-abstract that it becomes concrete *Untitled #7* (1984) of Agnes Martin,⁴⁶ consisting of 70 gentle horizontal pencil lines placed at equal intervals on white canvas (which looks pale pink on photos) has a real-life prototype: a super-concrete lined notebook sheet. I am unable to reproduce more than a fragment of the painting here because the lines are almost invisible. Her paintings of an earlier period are grids, like graph paper. Yet in the context of art:



**Agnes Martin,
Untitled #7
(1984). Fragment.**

As critic Nicholas Fox Weber points out, "Where there is reduction the paring down gives the object a life of its own. The work, consistently, is profoundly human, as emotive as ancient ruins, ineffably rich behind the apparent leanness." (N. Fox Weber, *The Hannelore B. and Rudolph B. Schulhof Collection*, New York, 2011, p. 11). This sense of humanity is clearly present in the horizontal bands of *Untitled #7* whose human scale and meticulously executed painterly surface exude a serene calmness that is contained within the very best examples of the artist's work. Source: [Catalogue Essay](#).

A number of people have left evidence of their admiration of Agnes Martin's art. I cannot dispute their sincerity and have no reason to distrust their judgement. Yet I am sure no one can find ineffable richness on the front of the painting and there is only the lean signature and date "amartin 84" on the back.

Here is my major problem with belief.



**[Coliseum](#) :
a model of soul.**

"Do you really believe that you believe when you believe?"⁴⁷ This triple-decker question, which I want to ask each time when I hear "I believe," I also ask myself, but my "I believe" means only "I guess," whether rightly or wrongly, with or without some rational arguments.

I know that my behavior is shaped by my beliefs, but how I act is always a result of the triple wrestling match between my belief, doubt, and trust, with logic as an absentminded referee. I suppose, this is what happens in everybody's *soul*—a kind of the Roman multilevel Coliseum where gladiators and convicts fought animals and each other. Like the Coliseum, human soul has its visible from afar arcades and a hidden [underground](#) seen today in the ruins, where people and animals were waiting for their entrance onto the arena.

⁴⁶ Estimated at \$2,500,000 - 3,500,000, it was auctioned for \$4,197,000 in 2015.

⁴⁷ Is "I don't believe" also a belief? [Norman Lewis](#): "I don't believe in belief"

Speaking about animals, a fleeting *shadow* has passed through my mind. In the animal shelter of an art gallery, the *souls* of the confined artists look from the canvasses at the passersby in hope to find a master who would believe in them and take them home. (Myspeak! See how easy is that?).



To accept the “never believe a belief” is too cynical. Beliefs in the right and wrong are usually real. They could be too weak to guide our actions, however.

Collective beliefs envelop an invisible, intangible, and undetectable body, like in inverted *Emperor's New Clothes*: emperor's new body. In the midnight of reason, you can be killed for wrong colors of your necktie.

Every belief, individual or collective, is ultimately about the future. Every ideology and every religion I know—with economics balancing between ideology and science—is a promise of a future reward or loss, punishment or prize. So are every political promise, spiritual movement, self-help guideline, nutritional fad, cult, current medical craze, and all advertisements, many of them truthful. The hallucinatory future throws the equity market, on which the wellbeing of many people now depends, into its tremors and bipolar swings.



The past can also be a matter of belief, but it cannot be changed, unless in the future, as the ideology of German past and Russian present illustrates.

There is a future, but the future **does not yet exist**. The invisible **future** fills up the visible clothes of our civilization with promise and threat. In a more than metaphoric way, the global economy, including the abattoirs and meat grinders of the African and Middle East wars, makes and packs the future like frozen hamburgers. But what does it have to do with art?

Modern visual art is a mysterious domain of human matters. It cannot quite fit the Knot of [Essay 59](#). It is a peculiar and utterly human strand of the Knot, in which ideas and Things are inseparably interwoven. There is something in art that becomes visible in modern times not as presence but as absence, like a cavity in X-rays. It is not an empty space, however: there is a filling made of something that I call *nexistence*.



Filling in
X-rays

Nexistence is a very strange thing. Does nexistence exist? Obviously, touching religion, I am asking for tooth pain.

Without the fetters of matter—something shared, visible, audible, wearable, or touchable—spirit can escape, evaporate, and join the clouds in the sky because airy thoughts dissipate, mutate, and recombine at the speed of fruit flies, if not molecules. Clay, papyrus, and parchment were the first sticky papers for catching thoughts, later to be bound between the covers of books.

Artwork does not promise any particular future, except some resale value, nor has it anything to do with social order and political structure of power. Still, there is a subtle and amusing similarity between modern art and religion as Durkheim saw it. It can be seen in modern secular

creeds such as movements for freedom, justice, and equality. The problem is that when you deal with **nonexistence**, your enthusiasm, imagination, and creativity can focus on **existence** with a limitless intensity. This is what modern art demonstrates: anything is possible, anything goes, and anything sells (but not “everything goes” and “everything sells”). Modern art, lodged between flea market and stock market, is full of effervescent and exuberant extravagance. Becoming a professional revolutionary, you have to show more and more brutality in your art, pierce your canvas with a knife, burn it, or bleach the canvas to kill all germs of visual appeal.

Here is one of Durkheim’s most important reflections and an example of what ritual pattern—or pattern in general—means. I quote:

Nowhere can a collective feeling become consciousness of itself without fixing upon a tangible object; but by that very fact, it participates in the nature of that object, and vice versa. Thus, it is social requirements that have fused together ideas that at first glance seem distinct, and through the great mental **effervescence** that it brings about, social life has promoted that fusion (page 238; see? I have read more than the Conclusion).

We have seen, in fact, that if collective life awakens religious thought when it rises to a certain intensity, that is so because it brings about a state of **effervescence** that alters the conditions of psychic activity. The vital energies become hyper-excited, the passions more intense, the sensations more powerful; there are indeed some that are produced only at this moment. Man does not recognize himself; he feels somehow transformed and in consequence transforms his surroundings.

To account for the very particular impressions he receives, he imputes to the things with which he is most directly in contact properties that they do not have, exceptional powers and virtues that the objects of ordinary experience do not possess (page 424).

Figure 9.2 illustrates a new global ritual often observed during street riots. Its pattern roots go back to human heads on spears, the ritual which, slightly modified, is still practiced by Islamic terrorists.



Figure 9.2. An effervescent riot ritual: overturning a bus.

Left to right: UK, 1981; China, 2005; Senegal, 2012; Egypt, 2013; Ukraine, 2014.

Modern art is the riot that has become norm.⁴⁸

In the context of time, the *Black Circle*, *Black Square*, and similar paintings of Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935) in which the title is an exact and full description of content, look like a peaceful exercise in overturning a bus. The pattern of overturning covers the emergence of abstract art, which at the age of maturity takes the form of painting and framing the titles alone.

For a pattern hunter like myself, any similarity is a fair game.

⁴⁸ This my formula is inspired by the best explanation of the historical pattern of Russian history that I know, first formulated by Marquis De Custine (1790 – 1857): martial law that has become norm.



“This is how we punish the traitors,” French etching, 1789

What I have unexpectedly discovered looking at modern art is that beliefs are plastic as much as rigid, stubborn as much as adaptive, dull as much as chameleonic, and conservative as much as forward-looking. They can outlast the climatic waves of fashion like grass rising after the waves of frost and drought, and they can vanish like the morning dew. They are deeply and imperiously entrenched in existence, giving it shape and structure, but taken out like a sea snail from its richly adorned conch, they display a slimy body shrinking under the sun.

Art as (almost) religion is a recurrent theme. Albert Einstein considered both branches of the same tree. Here is my most recent catch:

Art is almost like a religion. It is what I believe in. It is what gives my life dimension beyond the material world we live in. [Hannelore B. Schulhof](#).

It is usually “almost” or “like.” There is a reason why art is not religion: there is no Art but Art. There is only one Art while there are many irreconcilable religions and sects.⁴⁹ More importantly, art neither promises nor delivers you any guaranteed reward or punishment.

Art in the free world is gentle, peaceful, and harmless even if it looks ugly, offensive, and threatening. Art is not supposed to hurt you, bring good luck, or have any magic powers. Francis Bacon will never jump out of any of his self-portraits the way it happened in the [story by Nikolai Gogol](#).⁵⁰



Francis Bacon (1909-1992) Self Portrait, 1971

Like gift is recognized by wrapping, art is recognized by its settings. Even then, you need to believe that what looks like modern art is indeed art. If you do not, you may not recognize a urinal, vacuum cleaner, sleeping woman, and a pile of candies as a piece of art even on the premises of an art museum.

Although the belief, which I share, that art is what is called, exhibited, and sold as art is wide spread in the West, it is not universal because the form and content can contradict the viewer’s beliefs and experience (this looks like *alief*, see footnote 38). Modern art is profoundly nonconsensual and divisive, but as forgivable as a child’s prank.

All that playful evasiveness and volatility of art may cause some mistrust and need of certainty. You need some direct procedure to recognize art as art. There is an old principle “you know when you see it.” When an artwork has been sold, its quality and authenticity is already of no importance and out of the question: it has been sold! *Ergo*: art. You know it when it sells.

I suggest a version of the Turing test for art: an object should be presented to a person in an environment drastically different from that of a museum: best of all, in a dump. A painting

⁴⁹ Abstract art has a commodity potential. There are web sites that sell different styles abstract paintings on order.

⁵⁰ [English translation](#) (alternative title: “The Mysterious Portrait”). Gogol (1809 – 1852) was the most quintessential Russian writer. He left a still illuminating encyclopedia of patterns of Russian life, written in all registers of beautiful language.

should be without frame, on a canvass of irregular outline, moderately dirty. A sculpture should better be slightly damaged, an installation somewhat ruffled. Squeamish folks can run the test in their imagination or from a photo “discovered” in a wastebasket.

To recognize a photo as that of art, you need to identify art when it is **not yet called, exhibited, sold, or bought as art**, or at least you do not know anything about it. Can you try that on your friends? Ask them to try it on you? Please.

I need to remind here that neither anybody nor I have any reason whatsoever to launch an invective against art because art, like history or any natural accumulation of things and data, is as innocent as family photos and as blameless as the rocks we stumble upon.

Let us take an example of art known to be especially divisive and even offering some quantitative measure of division.

Figure 9.2 shows two paintings separated by 440 years but somehow linked in artspeak.

Although there is a lot of material about Cy Twombly (1928-2011) online, it is not easy to find a good reproduction of his painting *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus* (1962). It can be seen under magnification, also here. Unfortunately, the Web does not reproduce the important for Twombly (as well as for Barnett Newman and others) effect of its large size, 259 x 302 cm (8'6" x 10').



Figure 9.2. Cy Twombly, *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus* , 1962, and its enlarged fragment; bottom right: Hans Holbein the Younger, *Dead Christ in the Tomb*, ca. 1522

The painting consists of two spots looking like dry blood tainted with black soil. It also has some pencil scribbles, the largest of which repeats the title. There is a short but typical story related to the impact of the painting. There are testimonies about the strong effect of the work on the viewers. Art is always ready to lend a frame for the picture of your emotional state.

The following two testimonies of two professionals seem as incompatible and irreconcilable as Christianity and Hinduism or Buddhism and Islam. This is what makes art look **like** religion.

Testimony 1.

His [Achilles'] body is brought back to the Greek camp, where Achilles openly expresses his grief: it is this terrible scene, a magnificent example of male bonding, that Twombly translates into *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus* with an extreme economy of means. Only two red shapes—two spots of this sublime and bloody pictorial mess typical for Twombly—as if thrown on the canvas and spread with hands, dominate the impressive pictorial field. Below, the crossed out pencil inscription "Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus" seems to suggest, by its underscored horizontality, an elusive and fleeting presence of a body—in the tradition of *Dead Christ by Holbein the Younger* [emphasis mine, Y.T]. Both exemplary and unique, with a violence as much restrained as extreme, this work has no equal in Twombly's painting.

From catalogue *Collection art contemporain - La collection du Centre Pompidou*, source: [Jonas Storsve, original in French](#). Translation is mine.

Testimony 2.

Small children make marks on paper and then explain that this is a horse or an airplane or Mommy, and we willingly concede this; but ought we to do the same with artists' intentions? In 2005 I saw in the Pompidou Center a Cy Twombly painting titled *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus*, the main features of which were a red and a black swirl of paint, the first labelled "Achilles" and the second "Patroclus": on the wall next to the painting were quotations from Twombly to the effect that this painting expressed how much he had been moved by the *Iliad*. The way they presented Twombly's remarks suggested that the curators of the exhibition were as willing to find, and as willing for the public to find, all the pathos of Achilles' grief in these swirls of paint as a parent is to see Mommy in the child's squiggle. And of course once one's imagination is set in motion, one can "discover" all sorts of "mesh" between the work and its presumed meaning – for example, between the color red and Achilles' anger, the color black and death.

Henry Staten, *Art as Techne, or, The Intencional Fallacy and the Unfinished Project of Formalism*. In: *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, Garry L. Hagberg, Walter Jost, editors, John Wiley, 2015, p. 424 ([available on Google Books](#))

What is there to believe?

There is some asymmetry in two accounts. Testimony 1 is a completely subjective and self-contradicting exploitation of artspeak: "sublime and bloody pictorial mess," "as if ... spread with hands," "impressive pictorial field," "seems to suggest," "elusive and fleeting presence," "both exemplary and **unique**, with a violence as much restrained as extreme," "this work has no equal in Twombly's painting," "mess **typical** for Twombly." [Unique **and** typical? A typical artspeak]

Does the author really believe his words? I wish I could see in *Achilles* anything sublime, restrained, and looking like Holbein, whose Christ is anything but elusive.

Henry Staten relies on common sense and his personal experience. He denies any interpretation except what is supported by the senses of observers and is beyond belief. But he, too, speculates: "...remarks suggested that the curators of the exhibition were as willing to find, and as willing for the public to find..." This is belief. Or doubt.

Why do I feel the same way as other Twombly unbelievers, even though I agree that it is a bloody mess, only not sublime? Why am I so suspicious and distrustful? It is impossible to argue pro or contra and artwork without belief. What are the facts? Do I need to go to Paris to decide?

The undeniable fact is that *Untitled*, 1970 (**Figure 9.3**), an archetypal squiggle by appearance and mode of production was [sold for undeniable \\$69,605,000](#). This is modern art and there is nothing to guess and doubt.⁵¹ In spite of all controversies, Cy Twombly's paintings, including blunt scribbles on a blackboard (canvas blackened with house paint), were bought and sold for millions of dollars.

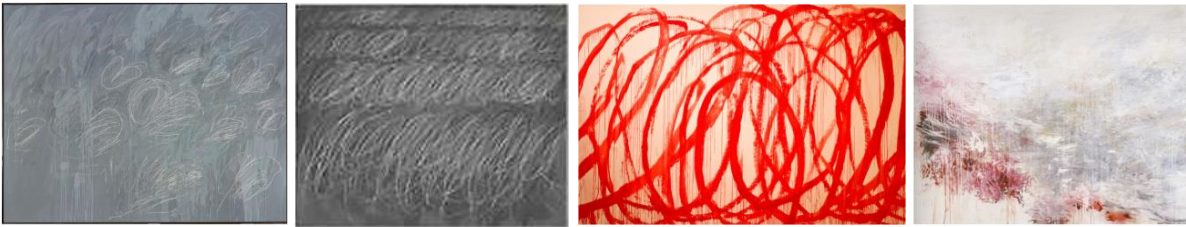


Figure 9.3. Cy Twombly (1928-2011). Left to right: *Untitled*, 1967; *Untitled*, 1970; *Untitled VIII [Bacchus]*, 2005; *Hero and Leander (IV)*, 1984). See [extensive gallery](#).

It is undeniable that many Web denizens who visited Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, where *Achilles* is exhibited, express their unambiguous fondness of the large painting. For [example](#) (Glen Dasilva): “Some people describe Twombly’s work as scribbles. I enjoy this painting.” *Bacchus* and other effusively sparse paintings of Cy Twombly also have fans in the unaffiliated public.

Twombly’s [obituary in The New York Times](#) in 2011 had 186 reader comments. Out of 134 clearly expressed opinions, 70% were positive to the degree of adoration. I noted a religious overtone: “This type of painting is a form of advanced prayer.” There was no reason for the readers to be insincere.

The diverse comments clearly clustered around two focal points. The positive comments extolled the fact of **human** achievement, a kind of *he made it*, while the negative ones looked at **artistic** achievement and found something like *he made nothing*. A few knowledgeable fans refer to Roland Barthes who wrote about Cy Twombly. Here is the orchestral *tutti fortissimo* conclusion of Barthes’ article on Twombly’s “scribbles:”

TW’s art—this is its morality, and also its greatest historical singularity—*does not want to take anything*; it hangs together, it floats, it drifts between desire, which subtly animates the hand, and politeness, which diminishes it; if we required some reference for this art, we could go looking for it only very far away, outside painting, outside the West, outside the historical period, **at the very limit of meaning**, [emphasis mine, *Y.T.*] and, say, with the Tao Tê Ching:

⁵¹ [Nouriel Roubini](#), the famous economist, the Cassandra of 2008, and art collector, finds a lot to doubt. Also, Google: “modern art” + “tax evasion” + “money laundering.”

He produces without taking for himself,
 He acts without expectation,
 His work done, he is not attached to it,
 And since he is not attached to it,
 His work will remain.

Quoted from: Roland Barthes, *Cy Twombly: Works on Paper*, in: *The Responsibility of Forms*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1985, pp. 175-176. [Available on Scribd](#).

As for the affiliated authors of lot comments at Twombly sales, they display breathtaking artspeak fireworks of truly imperial grandeur and I cannot help emitting in this sentence an art-squeak of my own.

Sebastian Smee (*The Boston Globe*) [sounds ambivalent](#):

Like so much of Twombly's work, it's right **on the edge of being nothing** [emphasis mine, Y.T.]: a desultory blackboard scrawl. Mere graffiti. An insult. A provocation. And yet, even in the context of RISD's crowded and star-studded modern and contemporary displays, it has a tendency to still roving eyes.

Sebastian Smee's casual impression of "scribbles" does not sound like artspeak to me. It is an observation, a fact. It can be explained and debated, while artspeak is sacred and not debatable. Sebastian Smee's intelligent and elegant [obituary of Twombly](#) is no typical artspeak either. When he points to "exquisitely perverse sense of composition," I see in *Achilles* what he means. Roland Barth can be, at best, noted and taken to account.

"To still roving eyes..." The live impression is strongly influenced by the current moment, mood, atmosphere, ambience, companions, and preceding events that could go back decades. However skeptical, given a favorable ambience and mood, I could have my eyes stilled by the two black-red spots and imagine on the remaining white field a chapter of my own life—or the whole of *Iliad*. **Two** means a lot: the foundation of human nature and all literature about it. Human nature displays between minimum two humans.

I consider Cy Twombly an outstanding—far beyond the scribbles—figure of modern art, much more diverse, impressive, intriguing, arresting, and much more interesting than his postmodern co-stars who have survived him. This is why I include his colorful, hypnotic *Hero and Leander* in the otherwise "desultory" **Figure 9.3**. I neither like nor dislike him. Details of his rich personal life are of no importance to me. He is part of history, not of my attractions.

I dislike minimalism because of my origin and background. I was brought up in a scarce world where it was believed that human labor could potentially make the world richer. I love complexity and both the process of its **creation** and the process of simplification known as **understanding**.

Here is my personal problem with "blackboard scribbles:" their complexity is so negligible, so "on the edge of being nothing," so "at the very limit of meaning," that any opinion cannot be either supported or refuted. Anything goes. This is *nexistence*: something, almost nothing, but with real emotional and monetary effects. The best embodiment of nexistence in art, its true

hyper-realistic portrait, is the blank white canvas. To sell such picture today [for \\$4.3 million](#) you need to make six vertical knife slashes on it, as Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) did long ago in his *Concetto Spaziale, Attese* (*Spatial Concept, Waiting*; 1967). The slashes of Fontana or burns of Kasper Sonne look like a further way to decrease existence and flip it to negative values.



A
A: Lucio Fontana, *Concetto Spaziale, Attese* ; **B**: Kasper Sonne, *Borderline (new territory) No. 11* (1912).

The route from the object to its description in artspeak is strictly one-way. It is impossible to imagine and reconstruct the object from its artspeak representation. This applies to minimalism in general and most of modern art. The viewer is completely free to feel anything. There is nothing to simplify (= understand). At least, there is something to celebrate: freedom. Do I need to repeat my mantra “Art is what...” etc.?

“On the edge of being nothing” is an excellent expression for what I call nexistence. It also applies to the category of **future**, which is where nexistence reins uncontested. Future is always on the edge of being nothing and turning to the presence. The past, however, is never *nothing* for as long as it is remembered, even if the memory is false.

Art, like most of human matters, is based on belief, but even science starts with a belief (hypothesis) or disbelief (discovery). The difference of classical art from modern one is that belief in the former is supported by the context, visual and informative, as well as human experience, knowledge, and memory.



Figure 9.4. Fact and belief. Left to right: Rembrandt: *Prodigal Son*; *Head of Christ*; Picasso, *Guitariste* (1910-11); Mondrian, *Flowering Trees* (1912); [project sketch](#) of Y-Block, Oslo (fragment).

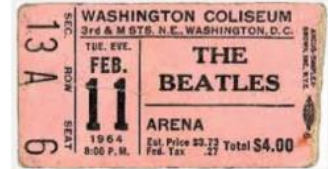
The context in Rembrandt’s *Return of the Prodigal Son* (**Figure 9.4**) is obvious for anybody familiar with the Gospel of Luke, but his *Head of Christ* (one of several sketches of the same model) asks for less literal beliefs, unless both pictures are regarded simply as illustrations to a text. For some of Rembrandt’s contemporaries, his heads of Christ were offensively modernist. There is nothing obvious in them to associate with Christ, as there is nothing to associate the painting *Guitariste* (Picasso, 1910-1911) with either a woman or any musical instrument, unless we believe the title, the commentaries, or exert our imagination. Piet Mondrian’s *Flowering Trees* can be called, anachronistically, *Y-block, Oslo*. Cy Twombly used to turn our blindfolded imagination in the right direction with a dollop of **existence** in the form of scribbles on his paintings.

Everything in religious or ideological belief is belief. The behavior, which is the only possible evidence of a belief, could be opportunism, conformism, delusion, transient mood, or conscious deceit. In an authoritarian society, it could be sufficient to declare publicly the required statement of faith to be left in peace. In a totalitarian society, however, like it was in the

Communist Russia, Mao's China, and is in the Korea of the Kims, one had to confirm it by daily behavior and participation in rituals.

Consensus over perception could be shaky, but it is possible. If nine randomly selected people say that this is a red dot circle (spot, disk, circle) → ●, it exists, even if the tenth witness disagrees. The presence of the red dot on this page can be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. This is true about the dot, but may not be true about a "guilty" verdict, medical diagnosis, scientific hypothesis, and any majority vote on arts and human matters in general.

Everything in human matters is debatable. The tenth witness could be right and the nine others wrong. What was right yesterday could be right today. What is right today may horrify you tomorrow. Religious fundamentalists can split hair on what was consensual for millennia: who is alive, who is born, and who is dead. Belief is a ticket with its admission stub torn off.



If a young modern artist relies on "Practice!" to get to the Carnegie Hall of art, it is better be practice in overturning the bus.

After 85 pages of this Essay, can I say some fundamental truth that would be not just my own belief but something at least pretending to be provable or at least reasonably hypothetical?

Alas, I cannot. I can see in art nothing but myself. Art is a mirror.

10. ART AS MIRROR

I see a painting. It is a thing made of wood, canvas, and paint. I can describe it as a picture of a young woman with long hair in a strange big hat (**Figure 10.1B**) because whatever it is, I can list all its recognizable components, even if they are small dots and flecks. My description will not be enough to reconstruct the picture, least of all from the “young woman in a hat” title alone. The short description “six rows of dense white spiral squiggles on black background, 68 x 90 in” (**Figure 10.1C**) is a more informative and better reproducible one. There is a chance that a reconstruction will be close to the original.

The “squiggles” of Leonardo da Vinci⁵² (to whom Cy Twombly’s was once compared in ecstatic artspeak) show the entire distance between Renaissance and Art Reformation (**Figure 10A**). I measure the distance neither in centuries nor in content, but in complexity.

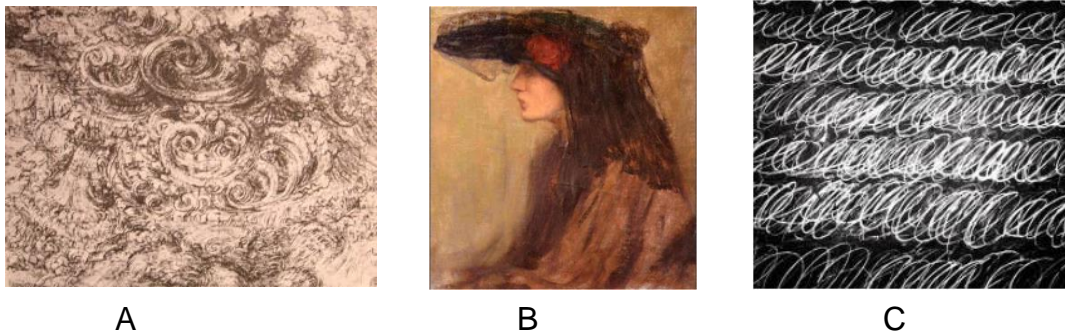


Figure 10.1. Art space and art time.

A: Leonardo da Vinci, [Drawing of a flood](#) (c.1500) ; **B:**František Šimon (1877-1942), [Young Woman in a Hat](#), ca. 1900; **C:** Cy Twombly, *Untitled* (New York City), 1968. 68x90" (172.7 x 228.6 cm). Sale: \$70.5 million in 2015. [Catalogue note](#). [Video](#).

Barnett Newman’s paintings are so simple that they can be probably reconstructed (*forged* is a better term) from measurements of geometry, color, and the well-known technique of his *zip*.

⁵² In his later years, Leonardo da Vinci was preoccupied with water, flood, forces of destruction, and the end of the world. See also his [A Deluge](#). We are in his steps today.

In visual arts, everything is *concrete* in the sense of the *perceptual*, especially “abstraction,” and nothing is *abstract* in the sense of the *conceptual*, except the frills of the artspeak wrapping. “Abstraction” in art means, paradoxically, something so **concrete** that it can be described well enough for credible reconstruction, materialization, and multiplying in many variations. It is a dish with a simple recipe, like French toast. This comparison means that (1) it uses a technology and (2) it can be enjoyed or disliked. In addition to artistic techniques, modern art appropriated the main contribution of its native century: technology.

The objective properties of art, whether simple or complex, connect all art into a single **art space** in which there are pathways of transformation, short or long, from any “recipe” (more respectfully, individual style) to any other. Thus, in the art of cooking, if you have a recipe of Italian Wedding Soup, you can turn it into the recipe of Lasagna by changing the ingredients, sequence of stages, and parameters. We can do it one change at a time, so that each step of transformation will be between close neighbors. Naturally, many intermediate dishes between soup and lasagna can be inedible because some ingredients do not go together, but maybe we should still try them before rejection. Meals, therefore, make an abstract space in which you can travel from one point to another.

As for squiggles, we can move by a series of changes from Leonardo da Vinci to Cy Twombly and, unbelievably, back, which by no means justifies taking any rapturous catalogue notes literally.

In my culinary analogy I use the idea of the book *How to Bake a Pi : An Edible Exploration of Mathematics* by Eugenia Cheng (Basic Books, 2015). It is about category theory, a branch of mathematic so abstract that some mathematicians consider it mathematically inedible. It is a matter of individual taste, of course. Category theory is not described in the book, however, only what can you do with it. It is an invitation to the party of abstract mathematics without letting you in.

Pattern Theory of Ulf Grenander, which is my personal obsession and foundation of spiropero.net, has a high level of abstraction. Nevertheless, it is applicable to anything concrete, including human matters, individual and global, for which hard science loses its edge. Pattern Theory is a kind of a mathematical chemistry (if not physics) of Everything and its transformations. Its secret is an element of personal “taste” (selection of generators and a template) together with quantitative measure (probability or energy).

Creation is a process, and time means physics. Chemistry is physics of molecules, i.e., **individual structures**, each being the only one in the world⁵³, and their change into each other. Should I say *creatures* instead of *structures*? Close enough. *Creations*? That’s exactly my point, but I have yet a counterpoint to make.

An artwork, for example, any of the three pictures in **Figure 10.1** (I will come back to the woman in a hat later), belongs not only to the art space open to all, but also to a different parallel

⁵³ While chemical structures are individual, molecules of the same structure are multiple like clones. Structure is abstraction (property, idea), and this is why two equal structures is just one, while there could be millions of equal screws and other Things.

universe: the **perception** of art by any individual in the public, of which I **am the only one** I can observe in full, inside out.

My impression of any artwork consists not only of what I see, but also of what I feel and think in front of it as well as between our meetings face to face. This is what I mean by art as mirror that shows me only myself. “Mirror” is just a metaphor and it should not be taken too seriously, or we would drown in philosophy of subject-object relation.

What I want to say is that my perception of the painting is as unique as the painting itself. In a sense, the painting and I are of the same blood of uniqueness, which does not prevent us from various similarities with other humans and paintings. We, individuals, also inhabit a space where we are split into species, families, orders, etc., quite like plants and animals; so do artworks and artists (ART AS TREE).

The perceptions by other people are unknown simply because we cannot read other people’s **minds**. Someday, a successor of Apple or Google or Amazon will develop a system to crack human mind—we are already skilled in manipulating it—but I, retrograde as I am, hate to think about the future in which the difference between humans and robots disappears. But I am ahead of ART AS FUTURE. Instead, I am going to my own **past** stored in the vaults of my own mind.

Next, I am coming to my first electric contact with modern, by mid-20th century standards, art of painting: Josef Sima.

It was in the late 1960’s, in a dark, bleak, brutally polluted Siberian city with empty shelves in the stores. May I still allow myself a little *myspeak*, a cousin of *artspeak*? Thanks.

Siberia had scarce indigenous population. It was colonized by Russia in the 16th century and developed by generations of former escaped serfs, prisoners, exiles of Russian czars and Stalin, and WW2 refugees who did not return home. Surrounded by hills, the city of Krasnoyarsk⁵⁴ straddles the powerful majestic Yenissei River with its perpetual nervous shivers along the spine, as if foreboding the Arctic Ocean, its final destination.

Living alone between two marriages and a few impenetrable to nails concrete walls of a small standard Soviet apartment, I was a frequent visitor of the old and rich local library. Scores of pre-Soviet Russian books in its “special” storage were forbidden to read by common Russian public. Young librarians secretly supplied me with famous, quoted, referred to, but unreachable books, which I needed in my search for the Czarist roots of the Soviet empire. The roots have survived to this day and the current tree of Putinism has grown high and wide on them.

Who could imagine in the pre-1914 world that the empire of the czars would fall soon? A few could imagine in the post-1945 world that the Nuclear Empire of the Communists would rise. Even less could foresee its fall by the end of the millennium. But that was already the time to foresee the current restauration of the Czarism by Putin. This experience makes me worried about the future of America. History is not just about the past. It is about the **unthinkable** future.

⁵⁴ Krasnoyarsk, founded in 1628, a center of a giant region, has been by now transformed, beautified, packed with universities, theaters, and concert halls, and grown to 1 million residents. It is still the [third most air-polluted](#) city in Russia.

As for my personal history, I was about to meet my future wife in the library—a future that somehow has escaped turning into past.

By that time, already deeply immersed in classical music, I discovered the music of the 20th century. Dmitry Shostakovich was aggravating my depression with his bubbles of optimism in the dark brew, while Bela Bartok was knocking me out of anguish by his bitter dissonances, skepticism, and refusal to surrender to both barbarity and beauty. Buying all vinyl LP records I could find, I ran into a Czechoslovak record, I do not remember which, with a reproduction of a painting on the jacket. It was *The Return of Theseus* by Josef Sima (Šíma; sounds Shima).

Theseus, a mythical Greek hero, had promised his father Aegeus to put up white sails as sign of his victory over Minotaur, but he had forgotten his promise and left the black sails on the mast. His grieving father committed suicide, plunging in the sea of his name.



Josef Šíma (1891-1971), *Návrat Theseův*, (Return of Theseus), 1933. [Source](#).

I had glued the picture to the nail-resistant wall and it became a part of my personal mythology. It was unlike any artwork I had seen before and it was stirring some very vague forebodings in my soul under Cold War tension, totalitarian idiocy, and the recent (1968) Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia .

Here in America, I often searched for Josef Sima on the Web in vain until our happy reunion about ten years ago. Recently, I have cast a net into the Net again and found much more materials about the artist. It turned out that Sima was still alive when his Theseus and I had met each other for the first time. As for the picture, it is on my

American cardboard-plaster wall again.

At the first glance, I had been struck by the clouds in the sky. Hovering over the grassy sea, they were unmistakably made of stone.

It is hard to say whether the sail is really black or just looks so in the dense shadow of a cloud. Sima is often presented as surrealist, but I see him as a symbolist—the style which, like surrealism, is unthinkable without content. I saw the picture as a metaphor, here a visual one, which is the essence of poetry. I thought the *Return* was about the future caught in the moment of its catastrophic turning into the past. Cornelia Parker's squashed and silenced but still glimmering brass instruments, stopped in their fall on the floor, like Sima's clouds, flicker in my prone to associations mind.

Now, in 2015, numerous works of Josef Šima are scattered all over the Web ([example](#)), with comments in English, Spanish, French, and, of course, [Czech](#) . **Figure 10.2** shows some of his other works, but I am more than ever certain that the *Return* is unique.

Wandering over any new domain of reality, we accumulate a stock of distinctions between local goods and habits. We begin to judge it not by differences from other domains, but by internal standards and practices. We lose most of the reasons for hostility and outright rejection. This happened to me when I started this Essay. In a modern art gallery, you can pat Minotaur all day long. Wading under the dripping stone clouds through the littered grassy seas of modern art, I lost my initial prejudice against its aggressive, provocative, deceitful, vulgar, and exploiting denizens and found there something to feel at home and to be comforted with, for a while, before returning home.

Modern art without any human or other living presence on the canvas leaves me mostly indifferent. Symbolism and surrealism are my most comfortable artistic movements. Like poetry, which uses human language in the way we never speak in everyday life, surrealism paints the world that we never see around but still easily recognize, like the headless but still human torso in **Figure 10.2.1**.



Figure 10.2. Selected works of Josef Šima.

1. Untitled; 2. Scenery; 3. Portrait of a Dancer; 4. A Whore of Barcelona (1940); 5. Europa (1927); 6. Composition; 7. Return of Odysseus, (1943); 8. Untitled; 9. Sea (1960) 10. Untitled (1967). Sources: 1, 6, 9: [A](#); 2: [B](#); 3: [C](#) ; 4: [D](#); 5: [E](#); 7: [F](#); 8: [G](#); 10: [K](#). Credit for 3 and 10: [Ras Marley](#) (a treasure of a site).

The minimalist Soviet reality was as boring as a straight line. The curved with passions human body of it was not. Human nature is the most stable and conservative factor on Earth, more than our rivers, woods, and mountains, but it has the same inexhaustible variability.

Looking into the art mirror, I begin to understand why I dislike minimalism anywhere in arts, except literature. In my youth, I was obsessed with Ernest Hemingway. I love understatement and everything that stimulates my mind with incompleteness. I enjoy surprise, novelty,

unpredictability, probably, because in my insulated Soviet childhood in a small apartment of a bleak provincial Ukrainian city (much brighter, it seems, now) it could be found only in books, music, and movies. Another reason could be the respect for human labor and contempt for laziness, both deeply implanted into my childhood values.

Art as mirror means that the live perception of an artwork is an encrypted—subconscious—look at yourself, your own space of childhood, school, upbringing, family, youth, love affairs, politics, and the rest of life, up to the current weather, a recent phone call, and latest troubling headlines. The perception can turn around in an instant, lose the charm halo, or, on the contrary, envelop itself in sweet haze. Recently, having finished a small brilliant book (*Jenny Offill's Dept. of Speculation*), I was so excited by human talent that I would probably be able to praise Damien Hirst's polka dots in artspeak. If you love something, you love everything around.

There are reasons for everything. Why is Rembrandt holding a special place among classical painters for me? Even before I saw my first Rembrandt at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, I had heard, as a child, a radio play (it was the pre-TV era) about his life. It deeply moved me. The sorrowful sigh "O, Rembrandt, Rembrandt!" still sounds in my ears. I am looking at the *Return of Theseus* 45 years after the first impact and I feel the hot waves of memory.

How do I feel them? This question opens for me the third space of art: **physiology**.

It is well known and described as goosebumps, shivers down the spine, and even "musical orgasm" (Google it). I feel it as a sudden hot wave in my chest and a constriction in my throat. In visual arts, only Velazquez and Rembrandt used to give me that peculiar sensation, if I was in the mood, but with my Odyssey through modern art, it happens more often. In science, it is the moment of invention, discovery, understanding, and solving a difficult problem. It has a tinge of recognition and something of reliving a dramatic past event, like passionate love, shameful failure, painful loss, or escaping a terrible disaster.

I formulate it as a combination of the seemingly incompatible **recognition** and **surprise**. This is what I am looking for in literature, poetry, music, and movies.

"We feel nostalgia for a place simply because we've lived there; whether we lived well or badly scarcely matters." (Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, p. 217).

My image of this sensation is the sudden fizzling of carbonated water, quiet in bottle but effervescent when poured into a glass. I also find it similar to a mild electric shock. It does not come automatically as response to the same pieces of art, but depends on the environment, mood of the moment, the overall level of wellbeing (preferably, low), and preceding or pending events. I certainly reject the terms like "awesome feelings," "ineffable essence of existence," or "state of being."

Here is a fresh example. I was looking on Google for Josef Sima. At the Flickr site of Ras Marley, full of rare art, I ran into a [picture of a woman](#) in a strange hat and felt the familiar shivers down my spine. It was *Young Woman in a Hat* of Simon Frantisek (1877-1942), an interesting artist and compatriot of Josef Sima. I had never heard about him before.



Figure 10.3. Recognition and surprise. A rat in the hat.

I see no clear reason why I was *electrified* by this picture. I have a weak guess, however. It was a **familiar** generic profile of a young woman in a **surprising** hat that made her look like a rat (**Figure 10.3**).

My favorite poet is Reiner Maria Rilke (1875-1926). The poets I love, including Rilke, sound like nothing one can hear in the street, in a company, or, actually, anywhere. Logically, genuine poetry, quite like modern art, does not make much sense, unless you are tuned up to it. You have to believe in it or just love instinctively or because you see something of yourself in it. Poets are not mad, however. They just do not want to say plainly what they feel, like abstract artists who do not want to paint plainly what they see (this is yet another reason why it is wrong to see this Essay as an attack on modern art).

"...I essentially am not in madness, But mad in craft." (*Hamlet*, III. iv. 187-8.).

I used to read poetry, waiting for my uncontrollable response with **extremely rare** physical sensations and emotions. I expect the same from music, cinema, and other arts. I got the same feeling right after having solved a difficult scientific or technical problem. It is the rarity of this feeling that makes it so treasured.

The mirror of art is hazy and buckled, but at least it can be trusted: it cannot **show** what does not exist. It does not show a big world where the eye can be lost: it shows the viewer, as mirrors do. What do I see there about myself?

Artwork exists in several real dimensions: materials, size, age, amount of artistic labor, price. Labor, originality, imagination, complexity, and intensity cannot be quantified, but they can be loosely compared for any two works side by side. There are also countless transcendent dimensions, like sublimity, simplicity, intimacy, intensity, emotiveness, ambivalence, efflorescence, nobility, brutality, etc. They are expressed in artspeak, which is the inflated language of lot essays and comments at auctions, reviews, and art books. Together they cover the issues of meaning (ostensibly) and price range (furtively). There is also content: a formal dispassionate description of the image as seen by disinterested people. Most viewers can agree, for example, on "this is a stylized drawing of a horse," or "that is a series of alternating 6 horizontal pale pink and 7 pale blue stripes" (Agnes Martin, *Happy Holiday*, 1999) or "a high relief of a winged human-bull chimera." The content can be referred to outside sources, as in classical paintings on biblical themes.



Meaning is the cloud where nexistence rests. It is a guess of artist's intent, personal impression of **an art reporter, interpretation** of the symbolism of the flowers in a vase, and so on. In modern times, artist's own narrative of intent at an interview is explicit but impossible to verify. The **meaning** can be a mix of reason, emotion, and distraction.

While I am writing these lines, there is a small group of picketers [protesting display of August Renoir's paintings](#)



in Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The reason: Renoir was a bad painter. “Renoir sucks.”

Modern art as a whole is a kind of performance art in which an immediate instinctive reaction of public is expected and manipulated. Art is the wind in the neighborhood, to which different chimes respond with different sounds of the same timbre.

Do we love or hate a particular person, artwork, company, gadget, or in fact some principle that the objects represent, or, even deeper, some pattern, event, awkward situation of our past related to the principle? To reach the heart of the matter, do we love or hate something in ourselves? Do we love something because it flatters us or strums our pleasure strings? Nexistence does not exist, but some of us see and praise it and, maybe, even believe in it. What can they see in it but themselves?

A confessed narrow-minded minimalism-hater, I could not understand how anybody can like and praise the scribbles of Cy Twombly when I first discovered them. In my heart, I still do not, but I see in them my regrettable intolerance to something that has no relation whatsoever to myself. Still, paeans to Barnett Newman make me feel fretful and uncomfortable. What do his paintings tell me about myself that I did not know? I am diving into my memory (and Google) and... warmer... deeper... I am 18 years old... and here is what I am finding, to my surprise.

A year of weekly class of formal logic was part of my high school curriculum. We had a wonderful flamboyant and utterly non-Soviet-looking teacher of logic and psychology, who, unfortunately, often missed his classes. In my life, he was the first ever person who emanated active spontaneous intelligence—something impossible to see in Soviet life. Moreover, Semyon Moiseevich Vul was the only living example of what was called in books poetic appearance. After almost 60 years, I am still feeling his imprint: my interest in logical **abstraction** (!), which underlines my skepticism regarding artistic **abstraction**. After long search, I have recently found some details of his biography and creativity, together with a much later photo. Two more teachers imprinted me with interest in abstract mathematics and history, and I remember them gratefully.



Semyon Vul
(1970?)

Logic was difficult for everybody, but I was fascinated by its abstractness, power, and rigor. One of the four laws of logic, according to our textbook, was the law of sufficient reason: everything must have a cause. This law, I now believe, had shaped my attitude to doctrines for the rest of my life: I do not easily trust anything I am told—outside poetry—without rational explanation. That was also a reason why I began to doubt the doctrine of Soviet Communism: it was not only self-contradicting but also lacking sufficient reasons, a dogma to believe and, actually, the very first religion I knew. Buddhism was next. Christianity and, much later, Judaism followed.

Only while working on this Essay, I learned that the law of sufficient reason was not a law of logic. It was a not universally recognized principle of philosophy associated with the name of Leibniz, although practiced already by Plato. Anyway, it was too late to reform a fervent rationalist, distrustful of dictates, imperatives, beliefs, and self-evident principles, but it taught me to look for the reasons of each of two irreconcilable positions even if both, as in politics, lacked sufficient reason.

Here are two samples of superb artspeak in which I emphasize, in bold print, a contradiction, as I see it.

(1) Dr. Roann Barris, Radford University, in [Barnett Newman and the Sublime: The Terror of the Unknowable](#).

If we can reduce Newman's goals to only three, they would be a call for an art which would embody **the essence of myth**, embody the sublime, and an art which would be the pure idea. This last belief is central to Newman's goals: that a shape is alive and contains the awesome feelings which a person has in front of **the terror of the unknowable**, or the sublime. But sublime terror is not the same as horror: horror is what you feel in the aftermath of tragedy, when it is too late to do anything. Terror is what you feel in the face of the sublime: humans can overcome terror through acts of creation and this is the value of art. Yet, this act of creation implies an act of starting over, and for Newman, this is the fundamental issue facing the twentieth century artist: the search for what to paint without making any references to previous artistic tradition.

(2) [Sothebys Auction Lot Note, May 2013](#) (Anonymous phone bidder paid \$43,845,000 for the painting) :

Along with other heroic artists of the Twentieth Century, Newman wanted to regenerate art and society through the invention of new forms of expression that could capture the **ineffable essence of existence**. *Onement VI* and its fellow paintings are not representational – they convey a **state of being and communion**.

In *Onement VI*, the single zip resonates within the canvas and with the viewer; it is described both by sharp tactile edges that retain a crisp memory of the delineating tape and by the gentle laps of marine blue that seep into the void of the cool light blue. Soft ghostly traces toward the bottom of the zip disperse as if into air, while deeper bleeds at eye level seek to bridge the gap of the zip from edge to edge, creating a spatial tension. The act of the pigment bleed is the locus of the temporal element in Newman's work that finds corresponding resonance with the temporal experience of viewing *Onement VI* at our **leisure and contemplatively**.

I do not see any sufficient reason for any of both statements basing on the appearance and history of *Onement VI*, but I see **a reason** for the dissonant duo. Art is nexistence and this is why you can say anything about it. It is you who exists and has some personal reason or subconscious urge to make a statement.

Of course, we cannot judge the auction lot notes by the same standards as academic research. The notes are utilitarian poetry and advertisement, as befits this particular genre.

Back to logic, it turns out, after having consulted Wikipedia, that the law of sufficient reason is not a law but a principle, and not of logic, but of philosophy, and it is controversial (as everything in philosophy, which I learned to like as a branch of dreary but imaginative poetry). Imprinted by rationalism, I had settled on science and remained, like an amphibian, at home in arts.

To criticize poetry and arts in general on rational terms is hopeless. Art is never objectively good or bad. If *Onement VI* was sold for \$43,845,000, however, there must be a reason for that, rational or not, but definitely simple and clear in advance.

Market is as hard on artists as professional boxing and football on sportsmen. It wears artists down. Success, like gluttony, deposits plaque in their creative arteries. Self-imitation (not to mix up with variations) reminds me of a revolutionary liberator gradually turning into a tyrant.

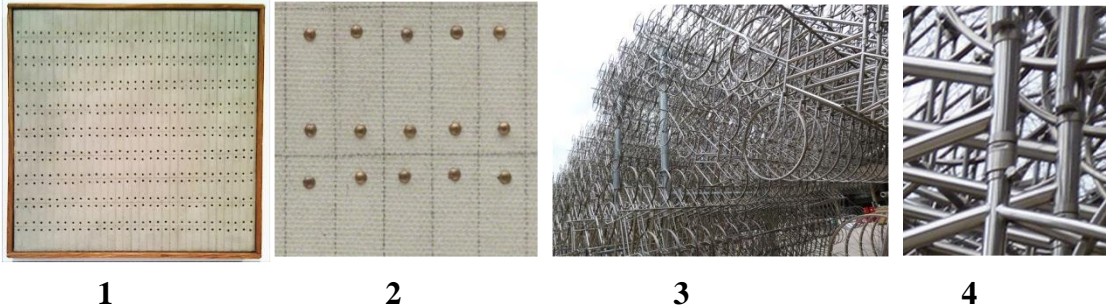


Figure 10.4. Monotony. Fatigue. Self-replication.

1, 2. Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, 1962 (with brass nails) ; 3, 4. Ai Weiwei, *Forever Bicycles*, Toronto, 2013 (not real bicycles). Photos (Flickr): 1. [Sam Beebe](#), 3. [Cameron Norman](#)

Self-imitation becomes self-multiplication, quite like the division of bacteria.

Figure 10.4 shows examples of what I do not like in arts: the bacterial self-propagation—the essence of boredom and the symptom of fatigue. At the same time, it reflects how I, imprinted in my schoollyears with formal logic, see the world as a pyramid built from single facts (terms) to more and more abstract ideas. It is also the vision materialized in information technology. This is why I see relations between objects, events, and phenomena that have nothing in common for most normal people. The grids, stripes, and nails of Agnes Martin,⁵⁵ 600 stools, 3144 imitations of bicycles, 100,000,000 (150 tons) of porcelain sunflower seeds, and 38 tons of steel reinforcing bars of Ai Weiwei—all that, from the point of view of my personal esthetics, is just one **pattern** of artistic monotony, if not a mania.

Self-multiplication is different from the respectable in music but rare in poetry genre of variations on a theme.

A cycle of variations on the theme of “line” could include power lines, clotheslines, genealogical lineage, and human lineups, branching into food lines, lines of POWs to be executed, children getting into a school bus, etc. Variations change the subject but preserve an abstract pattern, sometimes to hardly recognizable similarity. Artistic style is in most cases a theme with variations. A great artist (composer, writer, poet, performer) is the one who is able to change the **theme**, not just the style of variation. Examples: Beethoven, Tolstoy, Picasso, Rilke.

If art is a mirror, what else do I see in it? It is not the pile of gravel, paper boulders, and hovering stones that attract me. It is the **invisible** human presence of the authors. It is the creators: inventive and stubborn human beings who stand out against the crowd of cross-imitators. For me the presence of life in any form is a condition of artistry, from an uninhabited landscape to human body and all life forms between the two.

⁵⁵ Agnes Martin’s *Untitled* (1962) with nails belongs to San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. The almost identical *Little Sister* (1962) is in Guggenheim Museum, New York.

With years, my interest in all arts, including movies and literature, has shifted to **how** it is made. I highly grade creativity, complexity of means, uniqueness, audacity, and the mix of surprise and recognition. In other words, I value performance more than content, somewhat contradicting myself, but I set my own bloodthirsty standards for performance.

Now I am rather indifferent to “what” but hypersensitive to “how.” The “how” tells me about the artist, which is incomparably more interesting for me in modern art than what I see in an artwork, even in movies. I am a seeker of human warmth and sparkle. Is there a sufficient reason? Because it is rare.

The low stony clouds almost cutting the water—it is about me because I give in to the illusion that the artist at some moment of his life felt like me. In 1933, in the shadow of Germany, it could be very much so.

I cannot argue with the mirror. One could conclude from my relation to visual arts that I am extremely self-focused. Should I accept it? I have already done that in this paragraph.

For comparison, here are my relations with other arts.

In spite of my wide range of interests, my tastes are very narrow. Oh my God! It turns out that I am a minimalist, too. There are waste spaces of popular entertainment that I completely ignore. My music preferences run from Bela Bartok to Portuguese *fados* and Latino *alegria*, from Franz Schubert to American Blues, and from Sviatoslav Richter and Sarah Chang to Bulgarian folk chorus, but the distance between the landmarks is very sparsely inhabited. Same with literature: my three last reading feasts were John Edward Williams, Michel Houellebecq, and Marcel Proust; the latter was a long and often exhausting climb to an unforgettable view from the top. Sometimes, I take a praised book, start reading, see the author behind it, feel the thin “how,” weigh on my hand 400 to 500 pages of “what” (the side effect of writing with computer) and return it to the library after few chapters.

I am deaf to early classical music, baroque, and, with few strong exceptions, most (but not all!!!) of Bach and Mozart, the common musical diet for people of my age. Although repelled by minimalism in art, I chase simplicity and scout simple reasons in human matters, tangled but as simple as a jumbled packing string when straighten. Art, the realm of *what* and not *why*, is not for understanding but for tension and thrill, but I get my strongest kick from *how*.

I dislike anything aggressive and vulgar, as well as predictable, controlled, and mellifluous. I love novelty, even if gritty, but appreciation of novelty can only develop from wide knowledge, which I do not have in visual arts. Fortunately, the Web is a giant, comprehensive, and always open art gallery. [Flickr](#), [Instagram](#), and [Pinterest](#) have splendid collections of less known artists. They are coral reefs full of beauty and mystery, not a tank with a rotting shark.

After my first accidental but fateful encounters with modern art, I began to web-educate myself further, which turned out an exciting but finite endeavor. Modern art is an orgy of effervescence, exuberance, and extravagance—complemented by their corresponding opposites. It is also an ebullient local and affordable marketplace. There are young and old obscure artists who could

be reflected behind our backs in the mirror of art before they are captured by headlines and lead to the marketplace in chains made of zeros and clasped with a dollar sign.

This chapter has been a mess. When somebody is analyzing himself, with mirror or not, it is always a mess. I came to the art marketplace not for art, not for my reflection in it, however, but for the message of art about the future of all of us, except myself. I am taking existence by the horns.

11. ART AS FUTURE

The future has been the most powerful stimulus for the evolution of human imagination, intelligence, and language. Indeed, everybody can see the present, and if not, it can be pointed to with a gesture or a warning cry. The present is so ephemeral, however, that it turns into past right before one's eyes and loses all its relevance, unless we immediately extrapolate it into the future. We remember and store the past because we need it in the future. But the future, although crucially important for survival, does not exist! How can you discuss it, paint its alternative pictures in the mind, and share it with another mind if you do not keep it in the present by **thinking** about it day and night? I begin to consider the cave pictures as being about the tomorrow's hunt, not the yesterday's one. They were attempts to see nexistence and, probably, retain it in spite of a scarce vocabulary.

With our modern sumptuous vocabulary, it is practically impossible to talk about the epitome of nexistence without falling into some kind of *futurespeak*, similar to *artspeak*. If I veer off the well-tempered soundtrack, I apologize in advance for my shrieks and moans.

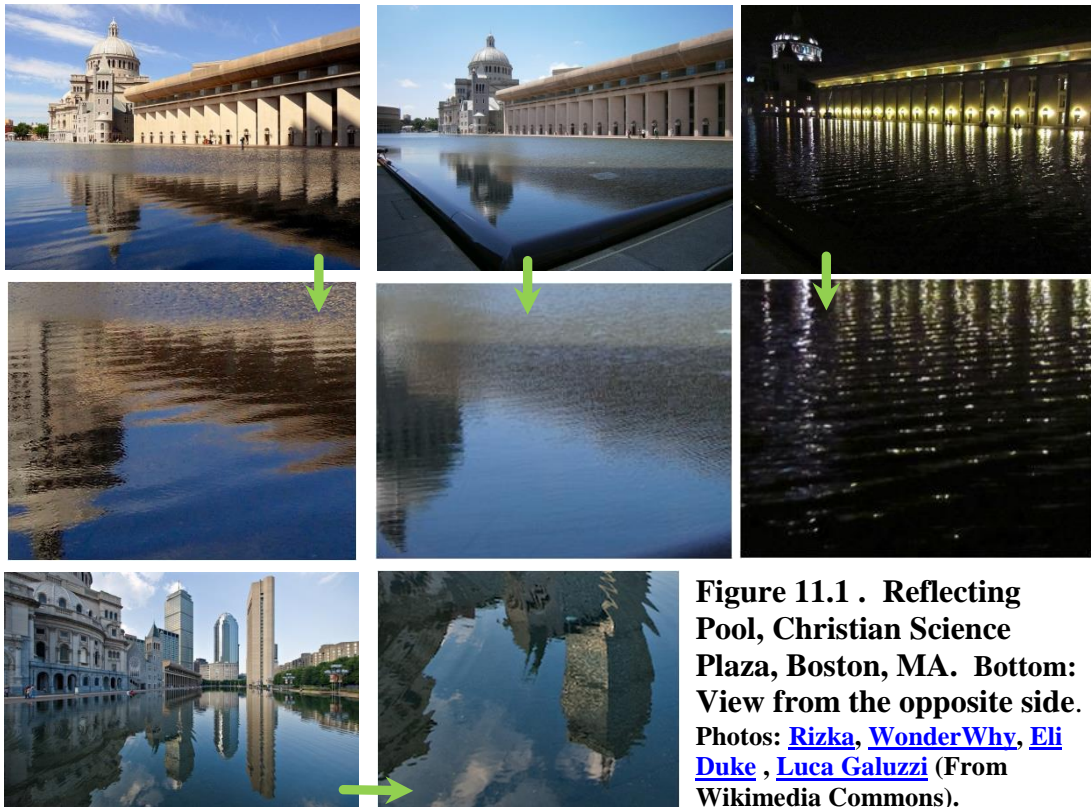
In my search for a magic mirror showing not myself but the future, in which I have no stake at my age, I recall the Reflecting Pool, the uncommon spacious landmark of Boston, **Figure 11.1**.

The photos in the **Figure 11.1** illustrate my vision of modern art as a fenced-off, passive, and enigmatic zone of our civilization. Like water and sunflower seeds, art can fill any shape. It reflects the surroundings. As a small part of economy, it must have the properties of the whole. The active role of visual art in society is minimal, but in advertisement, design, and decoration—and as status symbol—it is by no means art for art's sake. It is because of its detachment that I believe in the prophetic ability of art. Art reflects, foresees, and prophesizes, not intentionally but in a kind of somnambular or drug-induced trance to which, however, hardly anybody pays attention.



**Part of Janice Kerbel's series
permuting the same words (2014).**

Unlike the oracle of Delphi, visual art is silent (maybe, not for long). It addresses our most informative sense of vision and its Pythias speak in puzzling tongs of sign language. Text and speech can be misunderstood, but art has no verbal ← mediator even if it is just word art on paper.



Art can be explored as an emergent or recurrent pattern, the same way the satellite photos of the Earth can be trusted as prophesy of climate change. That can be said about any other facet of our civilization, but the advantage of art is twofold: it is available for observation in its entirety not only in physical space, but also in time, i.e., as preserved history. Even bygone biological species do not have such full continuity of their observable past as pictures and sculptures. Art has been systematically dated, signed, collected, stored, and sometimes deliberately destroyed. Art has nothing to hide and requires nothing arcane to learn. Just do not ask too many questions. You will be told more than you ask for, anyway.

History is potentially the closest approximation of science in humanities —something no scientist will believe but historians are struggling to prove.

As for modern art, we are reminded at each our step through the galleries that there is nothing to understand and everything to experience, as if watching a cake in a glass showcase is experience.

Like the Reflecting Pool—or a bed in a room—art is traditionally elevated above the ground level of daily routine and toil. The Pool shows an upside down image of its quiet ambiance. The capricious and wobbly wind-driven picture on the water depends on your place and time of viewing. On a quiet day, it shows two complexes of worship: one of money, piercing the skies, and the other of faith, kneeling on the ground. You can see one or the other from the two opposite ends of the Pool, which is, in a way, how it works in life, but there is a kinship of belief between both.

Art proudly and defiantly guards its independence, but in our times, all borders, interfaces, and defenses are getting more and more permeable. Even the national borders are mostly symbolic. Art, too, is connected with outer world in numerous ways, some invisible and others, like with money, conspicuous. The very difference between reality and fiction in digital era is vanishing because we are looking at the world through somebody else's cameras feeding the pages of somebody else's websites. Even the money, which in times of classical art could be rubbed between fingers, dropped to jingle on a beggar's plate, and probed by biting down, is immune to the physical conservation laws. It can be erased or created in an instance without your moving a finger—by somebody else's finger.



Tracey Emin, *My Bed*.

Photo: [Leo Reynolds](#) (cropped).

Art is what cannot be expressed in plane words and logical discourse. All arts, even the movies, are articulated, played, and made in ways we do not speak, paint, draw, and act in everyday life. Art is supposed to be something as divided from the ordinary life as the sacred from the profane—for as long as this difference persists. *My Bed* by Tracey Emin, with its condoms and body fluids, forcefully violates the difference, but it is art because it was (1) exhibited **as art** (2) not in a bedroom but at Tate Gallery, and (3) [was sold as art](#) at Christie's in 2014 for \$4,351,969.

The water in the Pool plays with the surrounding solid structures in thousands of ways, depending on the weather and hour. Art plays with life in the same way and often there is no similarity whatsoever between life and its reflection. There can be a reflection without life. Still, art directly addresses human senses, even when a computer squeezes in.⁵⁶

Art is made of physical matter. It is organized as human activity and branch of economy. It occupies designated buildings, occasionally spilling into open spaces. It involves hundreds of thousands of people. This is why art submits to the truly universal dictate of any evolving complex system (*exsystem*; see [complexity](#) or [Introduction to Pattern Chemistry](#)): consume energy, maximize its dissipation, grow, and evolve to stay alive among other competing exsystems. Art is similar to economy, ideology, religion, science, culture, education, institutions, organized crime, terrorism, ecosystems, and life on earth. But art is much smaller, simpler, and often as messy as *My Bed*. There could be something we do not see under the pillows and linen. Is it under the bed?⁵⁷ Art is drenched in freedom, its body fluid.

I see the world as a laboratory of pattern chemistry.

I am not going to expand here on what pattern chemistry is. All that, including the concept of exsystem, which can emerge spontaneously in a minimalist fashion, but needs complexity to be capable of evolution, can be found on my website www.spirospero.net. It comes from the

⁵⁶ “Much of the trouble in the visual arts today comes from our increasing dependence on the Internet, where all the richness and complexity of an artist's painterly surfaces is reduced to pixels.” Jed Perl, *The Perils of Painting Now*, *NY Review of Books*, Sept. 24, 2015, p. 57.

⁵⁷ The famous economist and prophet Nouriel Roubini, himself an art collector, [believes](#) that there is a dark side of art market. There is. See: Sam Knight, *The Bouvier Affair*, *The New Yorker*, Feb. 8&15, 2016. Google: Bouvier + Rbyolovlev.

mathematics of patterns developed by Ulf Grenander and generalization of main ideas of chemistry. Sorry for my repetitions.

In a nutshell, the main idea of pattern chemistry is that the daily configurations of the world are countless and they never repeat. The world is large. Its history is long. Its memory loses details with time. The abstract world of patterns, however, is small. It is countable, recordable, and searchable. A big novelty, which happens not every year and not even every century, can be noticed and entered in the roster. Patterns have a very long life. They can stubbornly repeat itself, of which the latest striking examples are Putin's Russia, brought, in various aspects, 80 to 1000 years back, and the Islamic State setting the calendar 1400 years back—both obsessed with self-proclaimed greatness. The red tide of anti-intellectualism in America makes me nostalgic for the times of Benjamin Franklin. Although, in spite of my age, I have never met him, let me count the description of his lightning rod from my school textbook as a story about my spiritual uncle.

Patterns are long lasting regularities of existence. They are abstract counterparts of the laws of physical nature in the lawless individuality-ridden and chaotic human matters. New patterns of human matters can be discovered like new phenomena and laws in science. At the highest level of abstraction, there are few very general patterns that bridge human matters with physics and chemistry.⁵⁸ It means that there are few basic choices for history to change, until something radically new, like the mass **displacement** of humans by robots, appears. The **displacement** of millions from Syria is a distant configuration of the **displacement** pattern so common in the earlier human history. I will add the **displacement** of horses by cars to the same pattern to emphasize the generality of patterns that rivals that of mathematical equations.

I remember times when drivers could tinker with the engines of their cars. If I am not mistaken, the driverless car, along Elon Musk, already rides on the back of the manhorse (do not mix up with horseman) who is **discouraged** or **forbidden to touch the steering wheel**. This is not an absolute novelty, but a big *pattern novelty* it is. Modern art is also a historical novelty, but there must be its **pattern mates** in all spheres of life where people are driven by nexistence, religion and political ideology among them.

Michel Houellebecq, a new obscenely audacious prophet of postmodernity, perfectly expressed, by chance, the concept of pattern chemistry in his "*Elementary Particles*" when he remarked that humans usually "have a small number of choices, of which an even smaller number is taken." Obviously, it is easier to find the way in a small system than in a confusingly large one. Big data are intended only for computers with their own agenda, quirks, and giant heat-spewing servers banished out of sight to the cold latitudes where the Frankenstein's creation is still wandering over the remnants of the melting Arctic ice, jumping from one ice floe to another and scaring emaciated polar bears. I begin to master Proustpeak.

Art, as I have emphasized more than once, has the advantage of being seen directly in its entirety, as naked as Manet's *Olympia*, without rationalization and without a professional broker. Unlike the wonders of information, art is as material as a bone of a dinosaur or Tracey Emin's *My Bed*. There is nothing hidden, nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing to threaten us. It has no complicated theories behind. It is made to be seen, looked underneath, and (furtively)

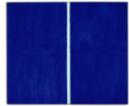
⁵⁸ A lot of related material has been accumulated by "[Human Thermodynamics](#)." [See also](#).

touched. It can be enjoyed (ha ha) if you are in the right mood, or hated (yuck) if you start picking on and asking questions. Whatever is said about modern art is equally true or false and is not provable or testable anyway.

A pattern historian, therefore, will look for the future in the rolodex of the past.



Patterns cannot illuminate the full length of either past or future. They are not a source of too much historical optimism, but the life of a generation is, in human terms, long enough to quietly accept the idea of historical mortality. “Evolution” sounds not as depressing as death in wars, revolutions, and riots. It sounds cheerful if we call it *progress*, with no real reason.



Here is what I see behind the curtain of Barnett Newman’s *Onement VI*.

The main novelty I notice in the panorama of modern art is its topology.

Modern art uses an unlimited combinatory palette to select and mix in any possible way not only colors but forms, objects, things, symbols, materials, chemicals, organisms, bodily excretions, ideas, words, life, death, nature, history, trivia, and, o yes, nothing—all that without constraints of meaning. I am saying “without constraints,” but there must be some.

The search for constraints and regularities in arts is a subject of *formalism*. It is a branch of *structuralism*, one of the not too old precursors of Pattern Theory. Structure itself is a topological idea. Formalism studies a work of art, literature, music, etc., as an abstract structure, like the medical student who explores a skeleton without philosophizing about life and death and references to *Hamlet*. I am not sufficiently familiar with research in that area, however, in which *art topology* might have already found its place. I can imagine that “so what?” is the question often returned in response to a grant application in this area.

Art has the double-decker topology of a phone directory. At the basic level, the **potential** connectivity has the topology of full connection: in a work of art, anything can be connected or placed side by side with anything (or nothing) in plane or in 3D space, provided the laws of physical nature do not prevent it. If they do, the connections can be rigged up, as in Cornelia Parker’s (and [many other’s](#)⁵⁹) suspended bricks. The “phone directory” itself changes over time: things and forms pop in and out. The **actual artwork** is like a conference call between several subscribers in the phonebook: a bundle of lines, a bag of dots, along Kandinsky, or a whole republic of small junk, along Sarah Sze. The connections can be calculated or random.

Ai Weiwei has set a totalitarian connectivity record with his zillions of sunflower seeds. Each of them, supposedly, is made unique, but all are trampled the same way by the visitors and their uniqueness and their craftsmen are of no consequence whatsoever.

Each piece is a part of the whole, a commentary on the relationship between the individual and the masses. The work continues to pose challenging questions: What does it mean to be an individual in today’s society? Are we insignificant or powerless unless we act together? What do

⁵⁹ Exceptionally inventive [Ken Unsworth](#) did it in the 1970’s.

our increasing desires, materialism and number mean for society, the environment and the future?
([Tate Gallery comments](#) on the seeds)

Does Ai Weiwei criticize or exercise the pattern of totalitarian mistreatment of individuality? I see it as an example of the inherent ambiguity of modern art. This ambiguity is not some kind of moral shortcoming but a necessary component of freedom. It is order and control that requires clarity and precision, while freedom blurs the borders and erases them. We are free to like and to dislike, less free with political correctness, more chaotic without it. Freedom itself is among the most ambiguous terms that I know.

There is a much earlier *pattern mate* of Ai Weiwei in European art: Christian Boltanski (France).

While creating *Reserve* (exhibition at Basel, *Museum Gegenwartskunst*, 1989), Boltanski filled rooms and corridors with worn clothing items as a way of inciting profound sensation of human tragedy at concentration camps. As in his previous works, objects “serve as relentless reminders of human experience and suffering” ([Wikipedia](#)).

His similar installation entitled *No Man's Land* was centered on a 25-foot-high pile of **30 tons** of old smelly clothes brought from a textile recycling plant. It was intended to remind about human mortality and the Holocaust in particular. There were also an arrangement of smaller piles, a wall of 3000 stacked old cookie tins, and a collection of heartbeat records, to which a visitor could add his or her own.



Christian Boltanski, *No Man's Land*, Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2010. Photos: [C-Monster](#), Flickr, [A](#) and [B](#).

Dorothy Spears' review in New York Times, 5/09/2010, [Exploring Mortality With Clothes and a Claw](#) was not sympathetic:

“...it's hard not to see it as a version of that childhood game, and as an embodiment of a similar, albeit more intense, kind of perplexity and heartbreak;

...large-scale exercise in futility...;

His engagement with both death and survival has drawn glowing comparisons to the poetry of John Keats, and also been denounced — particularly when his fascination with the Holocaust is most evident — as pornographic and exploitive.”



Van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*, 1886

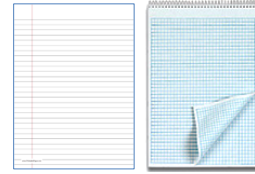
The piles of clothes of different size have been repeated by Boltanski many times, even amid the luxury of old European buildings, like *Monnaie de Paris*.

As a contemporary of the Holocaust, I am itching to say something, but I cannot judge modern art: it has the shortest statute of limitation, if any at all, for its offence.

It may seem that modern art is least of all interested in real life, but isn't art as

curious about a can of cheap soup as Van Gogh was interested in a pair of worn shoes? Isn't *My Bed* the Van Gogh's *Shoes* today? Then it is worth of \$4,351,969, considering its size and stuff.

I have already shared (ART AS BELIEF) my observation of *anchoring*: an subconscious yearning of abstract artists to send some signals of real life, like a word or two, a title, usually with no connection to the image, or a political or historical allusion. It could be some subconscious but recognizable content, like the grid or lined paper notebook in Agnes Martin's paintings. I go too far here, I know, but I can't stop.



To an educated eye, any abstract element of a composition evokes scientific and technological associations. Abstraction in sciences, natural or not, is what **cannot be seen**, but can be thought of. Triangle for me is a geometrical reality. Abstract art can hardly **surprise** me. It surreptitiously exploits the natural human desire of **recognizing** a comforting familiar image: cool safety of a dark cave, freshly painted wall of a room in a new home, motley fabric of a woman's summer dress, and dramatic colors of the sunset.



Art can be a bare wall but it still must have something to hang a hat on.

The future that art prophesizes is permeated with ambiguity. Dealing with believers, you never know what to believe and whom to trust. Each of your own beliefs has a shadow of a doubt. The professional knowledge is too arcane, so that you need an expert or mediator. Can you trust anybody in the world where you never certain who sends you an email: man or woman, friend or foe, computer or human, where inventions and technology are becoming double-edged sword and a universal key to all vaults because everybody is potentially connected to everybody and everything? A drone, which I have recently seen behind my window, the camera of my computer (I tape it over when not needed, following a professional advise which I do not believe), your smart time-gobbling phone (I do not have one), they want your soul, secrets, shames, and occasionally your very life. You are at the entrance into a prehistoric cave where the daily and nightly life of everybody is opened to all. You are where nothing is what it looks and nothing means what it says. You are the Naked Emperor who trusts the tailors. You are taking nexistence too seriously for your own good. A hard-boiled liberal, you worship your own pantheon (libertheon?) of nexistence. This is the topology revolution, started in art long before the digital revolution.

The choices of most fundamental historical patterns in the world and, coincidentally, the main American political choice, are as minimal as they can be: there are exactly **two** (2) of them: the **Red** and the **Blue** for America, rare **democracy** and prevailing **autocracy** for the world history. I am being carried away on the wings of futurespeak, bye-bye....



Jasper Johns,
Figure 2, 1963

"I want to connect the world" ([Mark Zuckerberg](#), 2014) sounds to me like one of the most ominous mantras ever vocalized with the tacit "connect to me" rider.⁶⁰ It has been the ultimate goal of intensely material caliphates, empires, kingdoms, religions, Communism, Islamism, Putinism, and, on similarly

⁶⁰ Especially in the wake of terrorist acts in Paris, November, 2015. On liberalism, see *Essay 16, On Somebody Else*.

ambitious scale, Amazon, Alibaba, Facebook, Google, and other benevolent behemoths, which we love to be petted by. I cannot deny that “connect” has been a mantra of liberalism, too, only with non-existent *we* instead of the full-blooded I.

I cannot imagine freedom in a super-connected world, all the more, the world where humans are connected with Things like a captive with his handcuffs, the keys in the jailer’s pocket.

Why am I so negative? I seem to be pulled into politics. Away from it! Back to the quiet of the museums and galleries! Back to my banished under the desk old (a few years) Dell computer!

What has it to do with peaceful, self-absorbed, innocent, playful modern art? My hypothesis is that art has been prophetic and freewheeling ahead of the rest of economy because of its **freedom**: from politics, ideology, manufacturing, communication, banking, war, world conflicts, entrenched establishment, and, most importantly, from doctrines and propaganda. Where else can you find it?

So much for nexistence, but what is existence, by the way? Existence is everything from proven possibility to certainty. Anything that has **already happened** has a proven possibility, which is the same as to say that it is not new. The future, obviously, stays behind that line.



Existence: the deer down the road exists even if only a possibility.

When I hear the imperial edict “connect the world,” which is not a dream but realistic intent, I easily imagine the connection as a tight Knot in which everybody and everything is as close to everybody and everything as in the cave of a prehistoric tribe.

Today, in 2015, it is clear that Things and humans are not separated by infinite distance in Jeff Bezos’ Amazonia (which I am using with guilty satisfaction): they are looking at each other through the class-proof glass like two close species⁶¹ that can already communicate by speech, all the more, gestures.



The future exerts immense power in a mystical and eerie way. It acts like the gravitation of celestial bodies, creating orderly orbits, and it works like heat, storms, and earthquakes, creating disturbance and chaos. The future plays with the fluid substance of human soul like the moon that keeps the fringe of the land wet under the push and pull of the tide. The future—sometimes taking form of the past—inflames human mind with tempting visions and chilling nightmares. It shapes individual fate and creates global history. Physical bodies, however, are completely indifferent to it because physical laws, believe it or not, are immutable by our definition of them and by the shortness of human presence in the solar system.

Future, mind, soul, deity, art, belief, ideology—those are the strangest things that I know. I hesitate to call them irrational or transcendental because they are part of human nature, which is

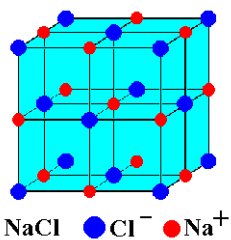
⁶¹ See Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (2012).

much more resistant and resilient than the ocean, land, and atmosphere of our planet under all the heavy material Things that crisscross, slash, and pierce it.

As for the future of art, its paradigm swing may come sooner than we think. The direction of a possible change is toward novelty, uniqueness, originality, humanity, constraints, and complexity as measures of value.

Modern art was the first human creation capable of connecting and reconnecting the world in a dreamy, reflective, and non-competitive way. The topological revolution that has been sweeping professions, occupations, institutions, borders, limits, beliefs, and the entire world order grounded in geography, meaning, and moral dichotomies, is what can be seen with a hindsight in the prophesy of modern art.

I see the future of the world as a continued topological tightening with the shrinking of distance between humans, Things, and ideas, good and bad, true and false, friend and enemy, help and harm, existence and nexistence. I see no universal brotherly love in that, neither do I miss it, except in a real family.



Please no association of colors with US parties.

We are in the World War 3 between democracy and autocracy with democracy in the state of a civil war and autocracies in their own global fights. Changing my position from artistic to scientific, no matter who wins, we will keep crystallizing in a lattice of humans and Things. In a crystal of salt, any ion—big negative chlorine or small positive sodium—has both kinds of neighbors in its close vicinity. Similarly, we will have all sorts of connections with benign and hostile species of civilization, mostly Things and humans, in a tight structure no more under human control. We will be always told that the fetters of connectivity look cool, make us look younger, and are good for us, yet some of us will never believe. We will be told in big red letters that the patriarchal past with topology of *pyramid* is “good for you,” but the future still offers us at least a binary choice.

But at least *my home is my castle*, isn't it? I was stung by the realization that the drones were the latest step in cracking open our castles and huts when a hummer had sailed right behind my window. Was it looking for *my bed*? Or under it?

Almost 100 years ago, art had croaked “*Dixi*” in its kinky sign language.

12. DOES NEXISTENCE EXIST?

I have not studied the entire history of nexistence, except as a prominent feature of Russian history in the 20th century. It is quite probable that somebody, apart from Plato, Hans Christian Andersen, and Andy Warhol, has already heavily contributed to the subject. In modern times, neither Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* nor Heidegger's *Being and Time* has anything to do with what I call nexistence, unless you take the exasperating obscurity of both books as a kind of artspeak. Yet, while editing the already finished *Essay 60*, I have found some reports of three most recent (2015-2016) sightings of nexistence.

1. Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic of *The New Yorker* magazine, concluding his review of the recent exhibition of Robert Ryman [an abstract artist who used only white color for most of his life], writes:

The emperor—roughly, high-modernist faith in art's world-changing mission—could retain fealty only if stripped of fancy styles and sentimental excuses. That was Ryman's formative moment. It was succeeded by a suspicion, now amounting to a resigned conviction, that contemporary art is an industry producing just **clothes, with no ruling authority inside them**. (*The New Yorker*, [December 21, 2015](#))

2. In the concluding chapter of his heart-breaking, gut-wrenching, and mind-boggling novel *The Sympatizer* (Grove Press, 2015), Viet Thanh Nguyen writes:

How could I forget that every truth meant at least two things, that slogans were empty **suits draped on the corpse of an idea**? (p. 355).

About the commandant of a re-education prison camp established by the North Vietnamese in the South Vietnam after their victory:

He saw only one meaning in nothing—the negative, the absence, as in *there's nothing there*. The *positive* meaning eluded him, the **paradoxical fact that nothing is, indeed, something**. (p. 356).

3. The third sighting is a complicated subject, see Ben Lerner, *The Custodians* in *The New Yorker*, Jan. 11, 2016, on how the difference between the wrestling existence and nexistence in art is blurred, but, anyway, both clinched fighters are being carried into “forever.” This is how I see the problem, at least in part.



Josh Kline, *Cost of Living (Aleyda)*, 2014.

Source: Paddy Johnson, ArtFCity.

Modern art, made of or with chemically and physically unstable junk, can have a short life span. What to do with it? This is the problem the new Whitney Museum of American Art has to deal with. The answer is restoration: to **replicate**, enhance, rebuild, redesign, or remake the original in other ways.

The full title of the artwork by Josh Kline is “*Cost of Living (Aleyda)*”. Aleyda is a real woman, a housekeeper of a hotel. Parts of her digitally

dismembered body—the head, made as realistic as wax figures of Madame Tussauds, hand, and foot—are put on a standard janitorial cart together with cleaning and scrubbing tools of the janitorial trade, all that 3D-printed. [It can be seen on the Web](#). The 3D scans could be stored indefinitely and used for the replication.

It has been missed that even the scans must be somehow rejuvenated because digital equipment also progresses and the old files could become unreadable. Definitely, never say “indefinitely.”

A similar problem arises with the unstable paint of Mark Rothko. For some of his large paintings, **replication** was considered, but the final decision was to project correcting multicolor lights on the painting.

What is the artwork which has been **replicated**, artificially enhanced, cloned, or recreated without the participation of the artist and, probably, after his death? Would it still exist?

Should the physical existence of a dead artwork be cared for like the bodies of Lenin and Mao Zedong in their mausoleums (if they are not already 3D-printed)? Do we need to prolong the existence of nexistence? Does the original work still exist in its replica? Does the artist remain the author of its replicated work? Is the cost of living of “*Cost of Living (Aleyda)*” worth keeping it alive? As Ben Lerner uses the term “veneration” regarding the attitude to the restoration of art objects, is modern art edging further toward an entirely Durkheimian religion? With tying art to political categories, are we using helium balloons as anchors?

I began to dig deeper for the roots of the “*Cost of Living (Aleyda)*.” There must be some explicitly named nexistence, I thought. There it was, a really big nothing that was big something: capitalism.

Severed human heads, the precursors of “*Aleyda*,” entitled “*Living Wages/Big Nothing*,” were exhibited by Josh Kline as early as in 2004 at *The Big Nothing* exhibition of Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), University of Pennsylvania. I quote from the [source](#).

Ostensibly about nothing, this group exhibition spanned several decades of production by over 50 international artists who explored **nothingness as the subject of artistic rumination** and negation as a creative and political strategy. The exhibition pondered the vacuity of contemporary consumer culture on the one hand with works by Andy Warhol and Richard Prince, for example, and on the other, sought to understand the **importance of the void in spiritual fulfillment** as famously exemplified by Yves Klein. [Yves Klein (1928 – 1962), French artist, see **Figure 4.2**. –Y.T.]

.....

In recent years, [Josh] Kline has developed a body of work about the body and labor in the twenty-first century. Speculating on capitalism as perhaps the **ultimate big nothing in our society**, Kline has created a new two-part project for *ICA@50* that looks at a FedEx delivery worker and his identity as a laborer in our economy.

On a view at ICA is a series of sculptural portraits produced by 3D biometric scans of FedEx delivery person—an expression of Kline’s ongoing interest in human capital and its role in our society.

It is difficult to sort out. Neither could it be brushed off, which is never recommended to do with nexistence, especially as elephantine as capitalism. Was the [Davos Forum of 2016](#), in fact, about finding the Abominable Snowman in the Swiss Alps and not about capitalism and the Fourth Industrial Revolution?

My *Essays à la Montaigne* are finished. But previously invisible nexistence, once captured and illuminated, now seems to be around every corner.

4. Here is yet another example. The almost 3000 years old ancient Chinese book *I Ching* (*The Book of Change*) is still fresh and in everyday use in the culture of China and South-East Asia. It is also a long-time teaser of the Western world. I quote the recent review by Eliot Weinberger of two of its modern translations into English (*What is the I Ching?* *The New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2016, p. 20):

It [*I Ching*] is the center of a vast whirlwind of writings and practices, **but is itself a void**, or, perhaps, a continuously shifting cloud, for most of the crucial words of the *I Ching* have no fixed meaning (p.20).

One could say that the *I Ching* is a **mirror** of one's own concerns or expectations (p.24) .

5. Finally, another attempt of ending this overstaying Essay.

In my youth I was taking my life lessons—as well as, much later, the inspiration for these Essays—from Montaigne's *Essays*. I was impatiently waiting for the next book of Sarah Bakewell whose *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne* (Other Press, 2010) I admired. Sarah Bakewell is unlike anybody else in the genre of biography, but it would take another Essay to explain why. Anyway, literary critics and readers have well appreciated her brilliance. Her most recent *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* (Other Press, 2016) is now in front of me, finished, and even more impressive. For two days I was glued to it, reading about Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others, always feeling the presence of the author in the list of her characters (and even in the illustrations). Just one example: "Rereading him [Heidegger] today, half of me says 'What nonsense! While the other half is re-enchanting.'" (p.186).

The high tide of existentialism receded into history decades ago. This pervasive but elusive subject kept bothering me since I had first encountered it long ago and until Sarah Bakewell's book. I referred to Heidegger, Sartre, and existentialism many times in my Essays, especially, 18, *On Everything*, 27, *The Existential Sisyphus*, 29, *On Goil and Evod*, and 45. *The Place of Philosophy in Science*. For the first time, after many attempts, having unsuccessfully wrestled with *Being and Nothingness*, *Being and Time*, and even Wikipedia (!), I feel like I understand, thanks to Sarah Bakewell, what phenomenology and existentialism are, how the latter came from the former, how both were incubated in the same culture that hatched all modern arts, and how much the thin intellectual substance of that philosophy was fortified with the intense, tangible, sometimes even carnal human stuff of the personal stories of its notables bruised, one way or another, by the experience of WW2. I also understand why I could not understand it earlier.

Existentialism generated long shelves of non-fiction books (rarely comprehensible), subculture (usually insular), buzzwords (typically overblown), fiction (often pretentious), and theater (frequently absurd), but I quote Sarah Bakewell (p. 33):

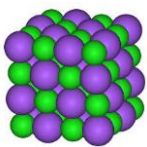
What is existentialism anyway? Some books about existentialism never try to answer this question, as it is hard to define. The key thinkers disagreed so much that, whatever you say, you are bound to misrepresent or exclude someone. Moreover, it is unclear who was an existentialist and who was not.

This smells like at least 100 proof of nonexistence. In the first chapter (p. 34) Sarah Bakewell gives a crisp translucent nine-point explication of what existentialism is about, which, in my view, without a slightest criticism of her, but with a great skepticism regarding her subject, is a collection of ultimate trivialities. The concluding chapter, almost painfully brilliant, conveys the measure of her own skepticism. But there is much more in her book than philosophy: a less known aspect of cultural history of the same period that witnessed the Cambrian Explosion of modern art. Philosophy, however, is a strikingly less pecuniary business than art. Money appears in her book only as strewn around by Sartre's generosity or needed to pay urgent bills.

In short, my idea of Jean-Paul Sartre's version of existentialism is: whatever you ask a philosopher's advice about yourself, the answer is the matter of your personal decision and responsibilities. Do not bug the sage. Look into the mirror at your own concerns or expectations. You are free to decide. You anguish, but do not brood for too long: decide and act.

With this scant personal extract, I welcome existentialism as philosophy to the realm of nonexistence. Nonexistentialism of *I Ching*, modern art, supremacism, nationalism, exclusivist ideology, and stern unforgiving religions create real powerful full-bodied **structures of something around nothing**, some of them bloodthirsty. But *I Ching*, modern art, and existentialism do not pit people against each other. Even the pumped up with brazen nonexistence US Presidential Campaign of 2016 will end, hopefully, with exhaling all its hot air. The white Union horse, its coat a patchwork of blue and red spots, clanking with firearms, will chug along, in spite of gloom predictions, toward the next gasp, along the pitted and cracked national roadways.

6. Wait! Roadways? Roadways... Now, what about driverless cars? It seems like the case of **nonexistence at the wheel**. This is a juicy morsel for a new philosophy of human/Thing condition.



Ideas—patterns of existence—never die. If I were a philosopher, I would return to the oldest problem of my profession: what is really real, reality or ideas? But I am, happily, a chemist.



2016

NOTE (2017): Trump is President! Nonexistence presides.

ESSAYS *à la* MONTAIGNE

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