

Suspended Subjectivity: Intention in Making Art

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I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Signed, So Young Park.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping arch followed by the initials 'SY' and a horizontal line extending to the right.

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ABSTRACT :

This paper addresses the notion of intention in art by examining the intuitive intention the artist discovers in the process of making art, in relation to the conscious intention that we recognise in daily life. I explain it with the case of formalised figuration (figurative images in formal, abstract compositions) employed in both pre-modern East Asian scholar painting and early modernist painting, prior to advanced “abstraction”. In parallel, I compare the Taoist concept of wu-wei (無爲: action without intention) – particularly Zhuang-zi’s – with Hegel’s notions of self-consciousness, each of which, respectively, influenced the thinking of these two distinct artistic traditions.

While wu-wei emphasises forgetting self-generated consciousness of intention, and harmony with nature, Hegel predicts the historical development towards self-consciousness in its separation from nature. However, Hegel then directs self-consciousness towards returning to nature, as an acquired second nature, i.e. habit of mind. I consider that forgetting in wu-wei corresponds with the habitual mind of second nature. Yet a question remains regarding how to forget an intentional mind without that very intention of forgetting.

I introduce John Cage and Roland Barthes as notable figures who dealt with this question. Yet Cage’s speaking of nothingness and Barthes’s effort to exterminate authorial intention continually recall the issue of intention, alongside the dilemma of self-negation.

Instead, I find the answer in the early modernists’ questioning of seeing, as an artistic mode of self-consciousness, in connection with formalised figuration. Painting becomes the way in which the artist questions the habitual nature of seeing in a conscious state of purposiveness, yet without the content. One forgets oneself in doing everything possible within the given condition. Formalised figuration arose from the correlative duality of this given condition – physical doing and virtual understanding through this doing.

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1. Prologue

The idea that artwork must carry the artist's intention uniquely developed from Western European modernism. While this frame-set of intention has been problematised since the time of modernism, the fundamental question of what we mean by "intention" in art has remained. I have looked into this question from the standpoint of the art practitioner. As a person who is not part of its Western legacy yet educated in the modern Western style of education, I take a hybrid view on the matter.

The validity of an intention can be judged only by the one who intends. As with a promise, if one is not the promiser, how can one know if that person intends to carry out what he says? However, regarding the intention in making art, this is not an easy question to answer. It seemed that there is more to the issue of intention in art than what we generally call intention in an everyday sense, as in "She had the intention of visiting her mother". What are the differences and similarities between these two kinds of intention? Why is it called "intention", not "meaning" or "message", in art? Stepping back from the customary acceptance of intention in art, I pose certain rudimentary questions regarding the issue.

I take a naive approach in the sense that I start by explaining what I mean by "intention" in art. If "intention" is synonymous with "plan" or "purpose", as in "She had the intention of visiting her mother", it is valued in itself, not in the action nor the results of the action. The failure in carrying it out does not harm its value. This kind of intention differs from what we search for in art. Both originate from the artist; however, the artist's intention is examined and evaluated in the work which is its result, not in the intention itself. The artist's initial intention cannot justify what is seen in the work. Then we are talking about something which is not under the artist's control or is independent from the artist's intention.

Nonetheless, the work is carried out with a certain intention. The artist acts intentionally in making the work, and may make decisions in a purposive way. There is a tacit, but definite, sense of direction that draws the artist. As an intention, it certainly precedes the action which is taken to fulfil it. However,

unlike a conscious intention, in the everyday sense, one knows it is there but does not know what it is or how it came about.

Thus it is different from intuition. At least, an intuition gives immediate knowledge of what it is, even though it is not always obvious why this immediate knowledge is the case. We usually try to find the reasons after we gain an intuitive thought, if necessary. However, an intention encompasses its justifiable reasons, and this trait distinguishes intention from desire, want, or determination, which do not necessarily require reasons. The reasons for an intention are embedded in the artist's inclination towards that particular thing or action, but not separately projected or thought out by her prior to the inclination. Thus she needs to discover them by working on the inclination. This discovery does not generate the intention which is already there, but is necessary to understand what it is.

I will call this intention "intuitive intention" as opposed to the ordinary conscious intention that we possess with its relevant purposes. It is a feeling¹ rather than something that can be verbally articulated. That feeling gives the anticipation that something meaningful and significant is about to materialise through the hands of the artist. This is comparable to trying to find the proper words to utter a thought that is as yet intangible.

Thus the artist is endowed with the same task as her audience regarding this intuitive intention. She has to understand what it is in order to communicate it to the viewer. However, her position for this task is different from that of her audience. Her audiences transform what they see in the work into meanings in their imagination, and the meanings they conjure up have references to return to, i.e. the work in front of them or the memory of the work. In contrast, the artist does not have any concrete reference to compare with the intuitive intention. This is the reason, if any, for why the artist's intention cannot justify the work. The intention exists, but is not communicable because it does not yet have a form, and thus is not describable either visually or verbally. Thus making art becomes a way to give it a tangible form in order for the artist to know what that intention is.

¹ I was inspired by Brendan Prendeville's "feeling of meaning" (2005, p. 224).

Therefore intuitive intention is also different from the kind of intention in art that is set from the perspective of an audience member, particularly one who might be a critic or philosopher, i.e. an intention such as Umberto Eco's *intentio operis* (the intention of the work) or Alois Riegl's *kunstwollen* (will of art). For an audience, the intention of art is always open as an object of discovery, wonderment and myth because it does not originate from them. The audience may even doubt if there is an intention for the work at all. But for the artist, intention is closed. One can intend something only when this something is finite, even if it is yet unknown and gives only a feeling of itself.² This feeling allows the artist to carve a tangible entity out of the shapeless lump of that something, i.e. intuitive intention. Only then can she examine it in its tangible shape in order to understand her intention. Her interpretation of the intention in this examination is an open-ended one; so is that of her audience.

As the main site of my inquiry, I focus on the entry of the artist's intention into the context of modern art – art since roughly the late nineteenth century up to the present. During this period, the artist's understanding of her intention became the main issue. Artists need to communicate to viewers how they are to respond to what they see. Artwork is meant to carry the artist's intention. Viewers are commonly expected to inquire into what the artist's intention was by interpreting what the work immediately presents, its composition for example; while artists are concerned with how they are to direct the work to its potential audience, and with their own subjective involvement in their practice. While all these are now routinely expected and performed, the details of what is involved in the artist's intention still seems unclear, particularly the part of intuitive intention.

This issue of intention impedes the understanding of modern art. On the one hand, artwork points towards a certain interpretation by virtue of its composition. On the other hand, the implicitness of this pointing limits the viewers' certainty of what they see as the artist's intention. The pointing by the composition motivates viewers to engage with the artwork, yet the ambiguity

² Arvo Part pithily describes this indescribable quality in making art: "He [the composer] must have the knowledge or a perception of what's coming when the hand goes down. ... The first step is everything, decisive." (Sliders23, 2007, *Arvo Part - Fur Alina*. [video online] Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c08i_9gumJs> [Accessed 10 November 2013].)

frustrates that engagement. In particular, modern art is considered to be more difficult to understand than traditional art since the artist's personal intention in the work is the main source for that understanding. Nonetheless, the artist presents her work publicly, in principle, on the condition that it makes sense to her and she expects it will also make sense to others.

Investigating the womb of this problem, I re-examine early modernists' debates regarding the individual self of the artist and the rising importance of the artist's intention in the time of modernism. I connect this with the change in art practices towards abstraction (not as a category of art, as in abstract art, but as a quality of being non-representational), which distinguished modernist art from its predecessors. I am interested in the doubt and uncertainty that early modernists felt about their methods (self-analysing their own sensorial experience in making art) in relation to the new direction of painting.

I inquire into the historical coincidence of abstraction and the emphasis on the artist's intention through Hegel's notion of self-consciousness, wherein development towards self-understanding caused art to become dematerialised, to bear its own concept. This notion, unfortunately, assumes that understanding of the self is reducible to a concept, which is not in easy accord with the physical act of painting. I test and question how the notion of self-consciousness may explain the problem of intention in modern art and its artistic direction towards abstraction.

2. Abstraction in Modernist Art and the Idea of Self-Consciousness

The most distinctive characteristic of modernist art lies in its tendency towards abstraction of figurative images. Why did the theme of “abstraction” govern so much of modernist art? Most of the convincing and widely accepted speculations have been proposed in the light of Hegel’s notion of self-consciousness.

“Herewith we have arrived at the end of romantic art, ..., the peculiarity of which we may find in the fact that the artist’s subjective skills surmounts his material and its production because he is no longer dominated by the given conditions of a range of content and form already inherently determined in advance, retains entirely within his own power and choice both the subject-matter and the way of presenting it” (Hegel, 1835, Vol. 1, p. 602).

This might apply to modern art practice; however, it is not likely that early modernist artists had those philosophical notions in mind when they took that particular direction for their art at the beginning of modernism. It is generally accepted that they were caught in the historical change which demanded that the artist take full responsibility for the work as a lone individual upon endowment of autonomous subjectivity.

I want to draw attention to the two combinatory yet separate elements, i.e. “the subject-matter” and “the way of presenting it” that Hegel lists. He foresaw the artist’s power and freedom over them, but did not see that the classical division between content and form was to be collapsed by her artistic freedom. The form becomes the content. The subject-matter of art becomes “the way of presenting it”. Modernist art found its answer – for seeking and expressing the self – in abolishing the traditional practice of representation in the division between content and form and adapting abstract (non-representational) form³ by collapsing that division.

In speaking of Cézanne, Richard Shiff summarises the cultural aura of modernism:

³ I use the word “form” in a general sense, i.e. the visible shape or configuration of something, unless specified otherwise.

“For the modernist, how things impress an artist ... counts more than how external objects look ‘in reality,’ with their physical distance preserved ...”
“A work of modernist art will seem to be authored, personalized, its image so closely identified with the mind and body of its maker” (1991, p. 129).

This shift of cultural attention (from what the world is in the objective terms of shared reality to what that world means to her as an individual person in the subjective perception) is regarded as a pivotal point for modernism. Then what is involved in the shift? I pose this question in terms of the difference and the relationship between “how things impress an artist” and “how external objects look ‘in reality’”. I consider this shift as an attempt to diminish the classical division by balancing the previously unequal weight on the objective appearance of the physical matter against the subjective perception of the artist, rather than moving from one to the other. From that perspective, making art becomes a way to merge the two by expressing the artist’s own personal view of the objective world. They are not in an antagonistic relationship; rather they need each other.

Shiff explains that “[f]or the modernist, self-expression becomes most evident” on the “opaque” surface of the work, and each mark on the surface is interlaced with multiple layers of the artist’s personal life experiences (1991, p. 131).

The ideas of self-expression, painterly marks and the artist’s individual person bounce against each other. Clarification of the relationship between the marks and self-expression seems necessary.

The word “self-expression” is commonly used in art, yet what we mean by it is not so clear. Literally (as the combination of “ex” and “press”), the artist squeezes or wrings out how things impress her through the act of marking. The self of the artist is not an isolated individual, but is conditioned by the things with which she is in contact, including what comes in through the eyes and goes out through the hands. And the marks on the “opaque” surface of the work serve double functions – to articulate how the artist is impressed by her seeing and to realise how she is conditioned by the medium of painting. The artist’s self-expression necessitates understanding her individual self, prior to exhibiting it, under those multiple layers of subjectivity – how the world impresses her. Only then she can transmit it to audiences.

Then how did those modernist artists, in their individual pursuits of self-consciousness, come together in such a particular direction at that particular node of history towards what we now call abstraction? Was abstraction a regional response to the particular history of modernism, or is it an inevitable answer to self-consciousness?

One plausible speculation to resolve these inquiries is offered by Robert Pippin. He addresses the issue most specifically in terms of the coincidence of self-consciousness and abstract art. He explains the union of meaning (intention) and “abstractionism” in art within Hegel’s narrative of the “historical development of self-consciousness” (2005, p. 280). His interest in abstraction is to propose “philosophical modernism” (2005, p. 9) by locating “the modernist, historical consciousness” (2005, p. 7) in art. He extracts Hegel’s theory of art, and develops it as a prediction of abstraction in art in order to examine our present morality of self-understanding. He uses abstraction in modernist painting as a historical incident that supports his Hegelian position of self-consciousness in philosophical modernism; through its self-referencing, art responds to the historical demand of self-consciousness.

His main argument adheres to the modernist view of subjectivity, i.e. “bourgeois subjectivity” in the Kantian/Hegelian tradition. Here is the overall outline of the argument:

“The most important issue derived from the famous Kantian and post-Kantian denial of any immediate presence to the mind of, or possible direct reliance on, the world (even ‘the world’ of one’s own impulses and inclinations), the denial of the ‘myth’ of the given. A human subject is, rather, a meaning-making subject (minimally always ‘making up her mind’ in experiencing and so likewise responsible for what she claims to know), a self-conscious subject, in this active, self-determining relation to itself in all experience as well as in all action. This ‘inseparability of mind and world’ claim raised the issue of how rightly to acknowledge the ‘subjective’ character of such experience and the many unique, elusive characteristics of self-knowledge. So the ‘bourgeois’ claim is that there are such entities and that they in fact actually do these things in acting and thinking” (2005, p. 2).

Previous modernist theorists⁴ regard the bourgeois sense of such a normative ideal, freedom, as a destructive self-deception and reject the legitimacy of a self-conscious, active, self-determining subject. Pippin, however, while claiming that such a 'bourgeois' position is not false, instead locates the problem in the incomplete state of bourgeois freedom in modern life. He demands that society should fully realise this freedom, and proposes to transform the structure of society through art and literature. Thus he uses the example of abstraction in modernist art to illustrate the phenomenon of modernist self-making.

The details of the philosophical arguments over incomplete self-making are not a concern of this paper. Nor do I try to validate Pippin's claims of bourgeois subjectivity as such. However, I take his questioning of bourgeois subjectivity as a trope for laying out the basic backdrop of the large change that modernist artists were subject to. Whether it is self-deceptive or incomplete, the notion of bourgeois subjectivity comes with the anticipated problems of individualism, free will, capitalism, political democracy, etc., which define our modern world. I focus on the base from which all these problems arise, the emphasis on the individual self and its autonomous power for self-knowledge and self-organisation. I take this base as a given and examine abstraction in art as its localised manifestation.

Thus my position on the issue differs from Pippin's. He sees abstraction in modernist art as a possible solution to the undesirable state of bourgeois subjectivity and the completion of self-making. I, however, question if abstraction was just the result of the modernist artist's effort to cope with the demand to be an individual, and was not strategically chosen by her to adapt to the demand of self-making.

From Pippin's point of view, abstraction is a marker – as abstractionism – for the historical change that caused an art movement like modernism rather than a particular category of art, i.e. abstract art. Thus, he is not concerned with modernist art history – neither the artworks nor the artists – per se. He works within the general conception of abstraction in modernist art such as this:

“The fact that nonfigurative [sic] art, without identifiable content in any traditional sense, was produced, appreciated, ... provokes understandable

⁴ Pippin names Heidegger, Arendt, Gadamer and Adorno as the examples of those theorists.

questions about both social and cultural history, as well as about the history of art. ...

Whatever else is going on in abstraction as a movement in painting, it is uncontroversial that an accelerating and intensifying self-consciousness about what it is to paint, about how painting or visual meaning is possible, came to be at issue, leading ultimately to the transformation of painting itself into the object of painting (all issues already in play since impressionism) are at issue. Given that heightened conceptual dimension, one might turn for some perspective on such developments to that theorist for whom 'the historical development of self-consciousness' amounts to the grand narrative of history itself" (Pippin, 2005, p. 279).

In this framework, to Pippin, abstraction remains as a concept which is synonymous with non-figuration. And he does not explain why abstraction, as a mode of artistic production, was chosen in order for modernist artists to resolve the historical problem of self-consciousness. Rather he takes such radical change in art as part of a normative enterprise of modernist history towards self-consciousness, lumping all the different gestures of abstraction (such as Cézanne's tactile brush stroke, Seurat's points, and Cubism's lines and planes) into one package of self-consciousness.

My inquiry resides in the productive mode of what we call abstraction, part of "[w]hatever else is going on in abstraction as a movement in painting". This limits my overall interest in Pippin to understanding his conceptual exploration of the linkage between abstraction (meaning non figuration) and self-consciousness without the physical substance. While I take his Hegelian extension of self-consciousness into modernism as the hypothetical basis for my arguments, I test how well his philosophical exploration holds up in the history of art, by examining some of the modernist artists' concerns with the historical demand of self-understanding, and their artistic practices of abstraction as their response to that demand.

Pippin's treatment of self-consciousness is a highly philosophical one. His narration of the "historical development of self-consciousness" remains within the history of philosophy. He positions the aesthetic problem within modernism alongside the epistemological problems of philosophical modernity, and takes

modernist art as the expression of the modern crisis (1991, p. 41) which, he claims, is the result of misunderstanding and the incompleteness of “self-making” (1991, p. 33).

In *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (2005), Pippin focuses on abstract art as an expected consequence after the end of image-based (traditional/representational) art, basing his theory on the Hegelian claim⁵ of abstraction “as a kind of logical culmination of modernist self-consciousness itself” (p. 280). Painting has become its own object, the object of its contemplation on what it is and how it understands itself. It has become its own self-referential painterly or visual meaning. This accords with a reasonably well received conception of modernist art: “art for art sake”.

From this Hegelian standpoint, Pippin explains the history of art “represents a kind of gradual dematerialization or developing spiritualization of all forms of self-understanding ... toward what could be called something like greater ‘abstraction’ in the means of representation” (p. 281). “[G]iven how we have come to understand ourselves, have come to understand understanding” (p. 280), sensible, representative imagery can no longer adequately express our autonomous life of full subjectivity, that is “a life understood and lived out ... as a collective, rational self-determination, not one determined by nature and fate” (p. 303). Moving “away from the sensuous and beautiful and toward the conceptual and reflexive” (p. 285), “art is treated cognitively” (p. 290). In this process, abstract art, as a bearer of meaning⁶, a conceptual object (p. 281), is taken as “the concept of painting as such ... and ‘realized’ as such in modernism” (p. 304). The constituents of art, such as shapes, borders, dots or frames, should be understood conceptually.

Modernist self-consciousness lets art itself be “both as artificial object beheld and as directing the beholder to the painting’s intentional object” (p. 286). Through the material part of art, our self-consciousness directs us to the intentional part of art – “a distinct sort of meaning, what it is within and for a human community”; “we search for what we search for in looking into another human’s eye:

⁵ Pippin is aware that he is making a difficult speculation on the basis of Hegel’s unclear position.

⁶ He notes that it is non-discursive. It is pictorial, not linguistic.

meaning” (p. 289). Art is now concerned with meaning which connects individuals within the human community rather than beauty directed toward the individual’s personal taste.

The conceptual part of abstract art, as meaning, explains Pippin’s interest in abstractionism in modernist art. He sees that the project of modern subjectivity failed in advancing the solidarity of the human world, despite admitting that bourgeois subjectivity is “a normative status achieved historically and as always inseparable from complex ... relations of social dependence” (p. 12). Individuals share meaning and concepts, and build human solidarity in the ideal conditions of bourgeois subjectivity, “under which one could be said ‘to actually lead a life,’ wherein one’s deeds and practices are and are experienced as one’s own” (2005, p. 10).

Finding an answer for this human solidarity depends on what “a distinct sort of meaning” (p. 289) is, and how it can be shared. Intention, either in its general or artistic use, is something that needs to be discovered by interpreting what is offered. In the blueprint of abstraction in modernist art, it is something formulated with the constituents of art, such as shapes, borders, dots or frames, in the physical dimension of the work. Then, how does this structural composition make sense as art, and how is it shared as such as a means of communication? Here I ask what mode of interpretation is appropriate for art, which challenges the usual mode of linguistic interpretation. While Pippin’s excursion into modernist art illuminates the historical demand of self-consciousness on art from his perspective as a philosopher, it does not deal with these specific questions in the context of what is involved in “a distinct sort of meaning”. To him, it seems, abstraction in art remains as a conceptual item, i.e. non-figuration, in the realm of language, keeping his distance from the tangible yet physical meaning at the initial encounter with the work.

Umberto Eco , in *The Open Work* (1962), questions the “distinct sort of meaning” (2005, p. 289), which Pippin leaves untouched, in his semiotical study of modernist art. Being aware of the shift in the practice of making art, Eco distinguishes works of modernism from those of earlier times, and acknowledges that human intention plays an important role in this distinction. He deals with the

notion of meaning in what he calls modernist “avant-garde art”⁷, and thus with the communicability of art. With an implicit allusion to the concept of self-consciousness, he begins with the premise that for contemporary art, “its power to communicate” has become a new criterion, rather than its aesthetic value (p. 100). He argues that an audience’s individual and personal relationship with art has become a prime concern, and that the artist’s ability to control it is vital for measuring the artistic value of the work.

Along with the communicability of art, Eco brings the concept of ambiguity into question in relation to the poetic quality of art. His word “poetic” is equivalent to Pippin’s “abstract” in that they both refer to intention in art and, accordingly, to the problem of getting it. The difference between them is their involvement in the nature of the problem. Pippin stops with the fact that art is an object of intention, but Eco goes further and asks how we should deal with intention. This *how* involves the human faculty of imagination and the emotional and sensual dimension of art. The issue of ambiguity inevitably surges forward, because we want to know.

Ambiguity indicates that the subject at issue possesses enough familiarity to grab the attention of the viewer. Without that familiarity, it would not even be seen as ambiguous. Instead of regarding this as a problem, Eco proposes ambiguity as an essential part of the new aesthetic function of modern art which calls for the viewer’s voluntary engagement with the possibility that something can be discovered.

He ascribes this matter of ambiguity to the avant-garde artists’ novel approach to making art, defines “openness” as a specific type of ambiguity (i.e. intentional openness), and introduces “open work” as the work of that openness. He claims that the artists of modernism, from Stéphane Mallarmé to Alexander Calder, intentionally created openness in the interpretive potential of their works, unlike their predecessors who avoided it.

⁷ I stress that he does not specifically concentrate on abstraction in modernist art. But under the term of open work, he includes all works for which the individual artist’s intention has become the fundamental source for understanding art.

What actually matters is not openness itself, but the degree of openness. Eco emphasises not only the importance of the artist's intention but also her responsibility for that intention – she must, then, be able to control the openness of her intention by measuring its degree. The artist's intention to make openness is what I am concerned with most in responding to Pippin's discussion of meaning in modernist abstraction. However, I am reluctant to accept the artist's intention for openness in a straightforward way, such as that which Eco assumes. It is questionable whether ambiguity is intended by the artist as openness, or if it is a by-product of wanting to know her intention as an intuitive intention which can only be revealed by the artist's concretising it in the work.

Meaning itself is not a new discovery unique to modernist art. Interpretation is intrinsically open. This is more so with art, because art relies on image, which directs our attention to itself but does not tell us what it is. The referent of an image is embodied in the image, and unpacking it is subject to contingent interference in interpretation.

Eco posits that openness is unavoidable in all artwork regardless of whether the work is meant to carry a single intention or multiple intentions. "[E]ach form whose aesthetic value is capable of producing such pleasure is, by definition, open - even though its author may have aimed at a univocal, unambiguous communication" (1962, p. 39).

For the audience, the work is always open, regardless of the artist's intention. This is reiterated by Roland Barthes: "the image is in a certain manner the limit of meaning" (1964, p. 32). He explains the inferiority of image with respect to meaning: the linguistic nature of image is limited and rudimentary in relation to language. Unlike a linguistic message, an image "indicates" a signified, but does not directly mean the signified. To him, all images are naturally polysemous, implying a "float chain" of signifieds. Contrastingly, text anchors⁸ its floating signifieds to the designated signifiers. It identifies what it is, and coerces the reader into choosing the designated level of interpretation.

⁸ Barthes introduces two functions of the linguistic message in relation to the iconic message of image: "anchorage" and "relay."

Comparing two categories of semantic markers, Eco differentiates between the semantic potentials of image (in art) and text, because of the weakness of the former in regard to meaning. Yet, he gives a positive twist to it. His choice of the words “such pleasure” in characterising the openness of art indicates this. He finds the essence of image, which can refer to all art, in that very weakness. This puts the word “meaning” or “intention” in a special context for art, particularly for abstract art. Eco explains:

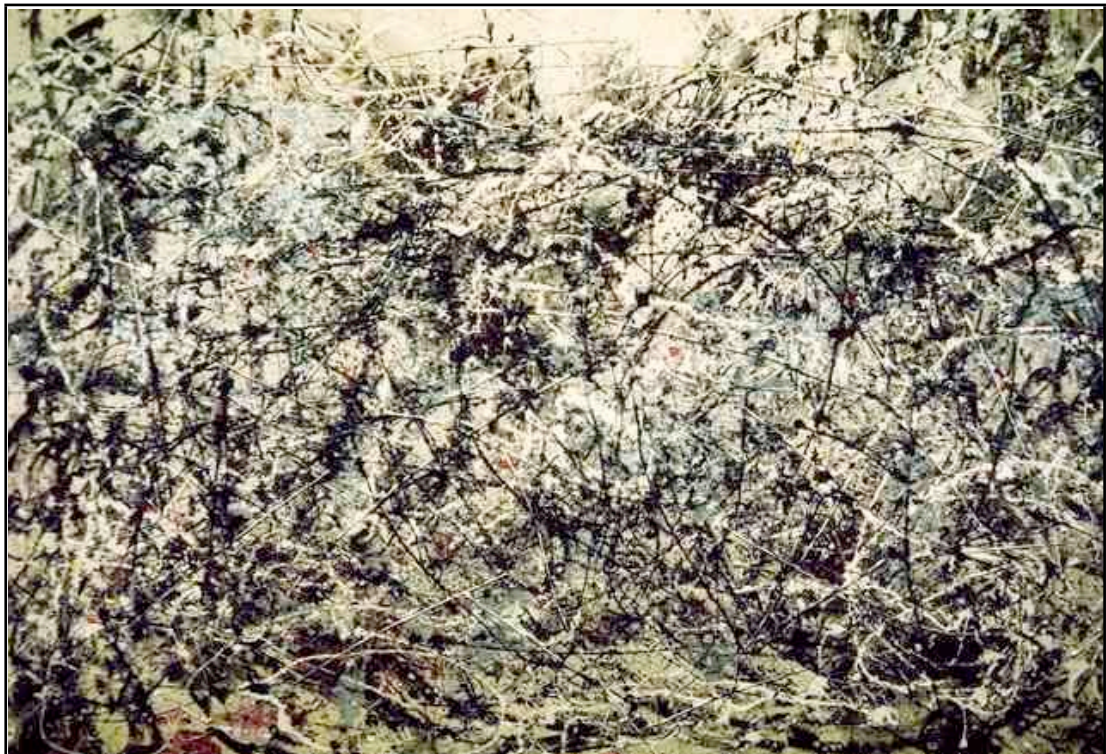
“... not every semantic marker can be verbalized. When semantic markers can be verbalized they have undoubtedly acquired a maximum of abstraction; previously culturalized and frequently expressed through verbal devices, they can even be arbitrarily correlated with other non-verbal devices (for example a geometrical form in a road signal meaning), and through the mediation of verbal habits they can easily be detected. In these cases, it is true that, as Barthes and other theorists say, non-verbal semiotic systems rely on the verbal one. But there are markers that cannot be verbalized, at least not completely, so that they cannot be conveyed by a metalinguistic definition verbally expressed.

The spatial disposition of the imprint of a hare’s paw cannot be verbally meta-described. It is, however, hard to assert that is [sic] has no cultural ‘existence’, and the proof is not in the fact that it can be ‘thought’ (which would be an extra-semiotic and somewhat mentalistic argument) but in the fact that it can be *interpreted* in many ways” (1979, p. 247).

We may say that art is a semantic marker which cannot be verbalised, or at least not completely so. How does this apply to abstract art? Eco explains that action painting, e.g. Jackson Pollock, still constitutes a form of communication, even though the intention of the painting may be extremely open. “The multitude of forms” may give the audience much freedom of interpretation, and yet direct them in certain ways led by the traces of the painter’s gestures on the canvas. He explains:

“This sort of painting is still a form of communication, a passage from an intention to a reception. And even if the reception is left open-because the intention itself was open, aiming at a plural communication - it is nevertheless the end of an act of communication which, like every act of information, depends on the disposition and the organization of a certain form” (1962, p. 102).

In the case of abstraction, what this kind of painting communicates is “the disposition and the organization of a certain form”. In order for the form to be communicated, it has to be a sign, even if it is only a sign for two, the artist and the individual audience member. “Interpretability” is imperative for a sign, and this depends on the balance between nonsensical randomness and total order. Eco endows artists with the responsibility of balance, in order to establish their work as works of art. The responsibility to define the threshold of openness needs to be found in the artist’s social responsibility to her audience, not in the artwork’s “function of aesthetics” (1962, p. 100). No matter how well the imprint of a hare’s paw is formally organised for possible interpretation, this alone will not make it art. The reason that Pollock’s painting is regarded as a work of art, not as mere drippings of multi-coloured paints, is because it is believed to carry his intention.



Pollock, J., 1948. *Number One*. [oil and enamel on unprimed canvas]

Putting aside our suspicion of what distinguishes Pollock’s painting from the imprint of a hare’s paw, we may take Pollock as an emblematic figure who helped to define the character of modernist art in the way we now see it. Modernist art encourages its beholder to grasp the artist’s intention by examining the formation of the surface, e.g. the composition of paint drippings within the picture frame, rather than to externally seek messages or stories. The work is self-contained, and

its interpretation depends on what the audience brings into the self-contained space of beholding. Likewise, the artist is driven to create the work in anticipation of the beholder who takes on this task. Taking the position of the beholder, she examines her own creation and questions what is in it. The self-consciousness in art does not aim to separate the individual artist from her audiences, but to promote engagement with them. Through understanding what she is doing, the artist projects a *possible* understanding on the part of the audience. This is the fundamental motivation for seeking meaning in art. Pippin's theme of concept in art resides here.

Considering that all art is open to interpretation, then what makes open work different from other forms of artwork, e.g. traditional art? Eco explains this with the concepts of univocality in traditional artwork and plurivocality in open artwork. As with the examples of medieval art and Scriptures, a work of art with an univocal message imposes multiple layers of meaning in rigidly prescribed allegories.

“In the middle ages there grew up a theory of allegory which posited the possibility of reading the Scriptures (and eventually poetry, figurative arts) not just in the literal sense but also in three other senses: the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical [sic]. ... A work in this sense is undoubtedly endowed with a measure of ‘openness.’ The reader of the text knows that every sentence and every topic is ‘open’ to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find. ... However, in this type of operation, ‘openness’ is far removed from meaning ‘indefiniteness’ of communication, ‘infinite’ possibilities of form, and complete freedom of reception. What in fact is made available is a range of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solutions, and these never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author” (1962, pp. 5-6).

The Scriptures are open, as they offer different possibilities of reading. However, their openness cannot escape the authors' control in their preestablished sets of univocal messages. The openness of open work requires, as an essential condition, the plurivocality of “indefiniteness”, which cannot be predetermined. Indefiniteness is the essential measure that distinguishes the open work of plurivocal messages from a fixed collection of univocal messages.

Eco enumerates examples of closed work, prior to modernism, in which it is the artist's intention to close down the interpretation. He describes the previous scientific development of perspective devices in which artists were aware of the interpretative subjectivity inherent in understanding artwork, but their intention was to restrict interpretation:

“The scientific and practical development of the technique of perspective bears witness to the gradual maturation of this awareness of an interpretative subjectivity pitted against the work of art. Yet it is equally certain that this awareness has led to a tendency to operate against the ‘openness’ of the work, to favour its ‘closing out.’ The various devices of perspective were just so many different concessions to the actual location of the observer in order to ensure that he looked at the figure in the only possible right way – that is, the way the author of the work has prescribed, by providing various visual devices for the observer’s attention to focus on” (1962, p. 5).

In comparison, Eco identifies the Baroque as having some qualities of open work. Due to its dynamic form and indeterminacy of effect, Eco holds that the “open form” of Baroque art stands in contrast to the static, defined forms of its Classical and Renaissance precursors, and “it induces the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects” (1962, p. 7). Beyond that, he differentiates open work from other artwork of openness or open form, such as Baroque art, in that the artists of the open work intentionally make their artwork open, while the artists of other forms of art take openness as a natural characteristic of art. Through his historical survey of openness, Eco illustrates the gradual move towards this special kind of openness in the open work of modernism.

Eco then expands the territory of open work to include the more extreme mode consisting of “work in movement”⁹ such as Alexander Calder’s mobiles. He identifies this mode of open work as one which “characteristically consists of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units” (1962, p. 12). In this case, the artist leaves the work structurally unfinished for the audience to complete.

⁹ This idea of work in movement is much developed at a later time. As the artist’s intention dissolves, the concept of art itself becomes questionable.

Thus, the physical structure of the work is designed to change depending on the audience's choice of perspectives and the contingency of the setting.

With the idea of open work, Eco points out the predominant change in the way an artist considers audiences in relation to her artwork. Eco puts the audience in a more active position, rather than that of a mere receiver, by giving them the role of performing interpretation. The open work is "characterized by the invitation to make the work together with the author" (1962, p. 21). This invitation imposes on the artist a perplexing task regarding the degree of openness. Eco asks the artist to "determine whether and to what extent the 'openness' of a particular work to various readings is the result of an intentional organization of its field of possibilities" (p. 100).

In the face of these two seemingly contradicting concepts, intentional organisation and openness, I question if such advice is reasonable without understanding what that thing we call "intention" means to the artist or how it functions in the process of making art. I recall his statement about Pollock's painting:

"This sort of painting is still a form of communication, a passage from an intention to a reception. And even if the reception is left open-because the intention itself was open, aiming at a plural communication" (1962, p. 102).

I do not assume that Eco intends to speak on behalf of the artist, by saying "... the intention itself was open, aiming at a plural communication". What makes him believe that openness was intentional?

"If we want to pursue our analysis of the "openness" proposed by contemporary poetics, and establish the degree of novelty it has brought to the historical development of aesthetics, we must first find out what, in fact, distinguishes the intentional "openness" advocated by contemporary art movements from that which we consider typical of all works of art" (1962, p. 24).

He then describes how the openness was proposed and advocated by contemporary art movements, in which Eco himself acts as an audience. This

leads me to question the definition of intention. If he is not the artist who intends, how can he know if the openness was intentional?

Eco, a modernist audience, clearly notes the drastic change in the history of art: increased difficulty in interpreting art propels an audience into forming her own interpretation, which may or may not correspond to what the artist intended.

“A study of contemporary open works nevertheless reveals that, in most cases, their openness is intentional, explicit, and extreme - that is, based not merely on the nature of the aesthetic object and on its composition but on the very elements that are combined in it” (p. 39).

“the only criterion I can use in my evaluation of the work derives from the degree of coincidence between my capacity for aesthetic pleasure and the intentions to which the artist has implicitly given form in his work” (p. 100).

Aesthetic pleasure arises no longer from what is depicted on the surface, but from how the surface is treated. Yet, even his free pursuit for aesthetic pleasure is anchored around “the intentions to which the artist has implicitly given form”. In front of a work of art, a human artefact, one wonders about the intention of the creator. This very fact distinguishes Pollock’s painting from the imprint of a hare’s paw, metaphorically speaking. It is painted on a canvas and hung in an art gallery. Thus it requires – or is given – the attention the imprint of a hare’s paw would not have. It is a human artefact and a publicly recognised one.¹⁰ This is not to belittle Pollock’s painting, or the art discourses around his work, but to point out the historical change of encouraging individuals’ voluntary participation in the work, which nonetheless belongs to the institutional setting in an authoritarian context. The attention given to Pollock’s painting, and to others in the same spectrum, is part of this change.

Eco’s intentional openness, in fact, results from his hopeful anticipation of a new society “with a democratic, pluralistic attitude to politics and culture” (Eco, 1962, p. xxvii), as David Robey explains in the introduction. Such a cultural attitude explains subsequent discourses regarding the artist’s intention, including extreme

¹⁰ Departing from its position in the institution of religion, art enters its modern era trying to gain public recognition for itself as an independent institution. Thus what is art is defined by its institution. This shift brings change to the overall culture of art reception.

cases like Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and John Cage's 4' 33". The artist's intention continued to be problematic because of its sovereign power enshrined by the institutional set-up. Eco's intentional openness functions as his remedy for this. He explains the reason thus:

"Our civilization is still far from accepting the unconditional abandonment to vital forces advocated by the Zen sage. ... we still live in a culture in which our desire to abandon ourselves to the free pursuit of visual and imaginative associations must be artificially induced by means of an intentionally suggestive construct. ... In other words, we still live in a culture dominated by dialectics: I am supposed to judge both the work in relation to my experience of it, and my experience of it in relation to the work. ...

Thus, even an art that upholds the values of vitality, action, movement, brute matter, and chance rests on the dialectics between the work itself and the "openness" of the "readings" it invites. A work of art can be open only insofar as it remains a work; beyond a certain boundary, it becomes mere noise" (1962, p. 100).

Eco corroborates what Pippin explained as the "incompleteness" of the bourgeois subjectivity in regard to the notion of freedom in modern life. Pippin explains; "Genuinely leading a life is rightly taken to involve the problem of freedom", which he defines as "being able somehow to own up to, justify, and stand behind one's deeds (*reclaim* them as my own)", and involves "understanding what it is to be responsive to norms, reasons" (2005, p. 11). He adds "[a]ny traces of genuine subjectivity detectable in a modern form of life ... will thus be traces of the presence of practical reason in human practices, a presence beyond instrumental or coordinating strategies" (2005, p. 11). One's freedom lies not in making choices, but in understanding the reasons and being responsible for those choices. The artist's choices in making art and the audience's interpretation of these choices require responsibility for this understanding (what makes one understand what one thinks that one understands).

Measuring the degree of (intentional) openness is Eco's suggestion to the avant-garde artists as a tactic for such "genuine subjectivity detectable in a modern form of life", "beyond instrumental or coordinating strategies", as Pippin proposes (2005, p. 11). Eco sees the potential of open work for inducing "the free pursuit of

visual and imaginative associations” in the reception of the work, since the audiences cannot do it themselves. He describes it as the artist’s invitation to the audience “to *make the work* together with the author” (1962, p. 21). He stresses the role of the artist in modernist work. In particular, his notion of the degree of openness is pertinent to the artistic ambiguity which affects the audience’s reception of the work. On the one hand, too little openness makes the work evident, and does not motivate further interest in the work. On the other hand, too much openness does not let the audience make any sense out of the work. Either way, the audience cannot engage in the work. Art can only be understood within the approximation of the relationship – “the ‘openness’ of the ‘readings’”. A work of art can be open or ambiguous only insofar as it remains a work with evidence of intention, i.e. meaning, in what is presented.

Eco’s suggestion or advice to measure the degree of openness makes plausible sense from his position as an audience member who expects intention in a work. However, his freedom does not escape his own expectations. Here the notion of induced freedom seems to be as problematic as that of intentional openness. I question if the free pursuit that needs to be induced by the artist is likely to be called “free pursuit” in practice.

Both Eco and Pippin show us the importance of historical change in art. However the question of intention/meaning in art still remains along with the issue of freedom in receiving it. This freedom can be gained only by each audience member for herself. As Pippin emphasises, it must be *achieved* on her own terms. However, for Eco, it requires a precondition to determine its direction. Eco states: “[t]his intention can ... assume all sorts of different forms: our present task is to consider how persuasive they must be in order to give a direction to the freedom of the viewer” (p. 99). What the audience takes is the conditional freedom effected or co-ordinated by the strategy of intentional openness. As a matter of choice, freedom requires a set of standards to measure the validity of the choice as a conscious decision. Without these standards, nothing can be measured and thus chosen. Then the issue is the artist’s preparation of the direction “to the freedom of the viewer”.

Presenting the work itself is and should be the artist's gesture of invitation to the audience. Each audience member is free to receive it in whatever ways it interests her. The work can be more or less open depending on how it is received, and the audience has the freedom to take it as such. The idea is not to encourage the artist's care or responsibility for her audience, but to draw a boundary for her, to protect the audience's freedom. Controlling the reception of the work (such as deliberately refraining from fixing the meaning¹¹) is merely seduction, to grab the audience's attention. The problem of intention becomes a moral one.

The idea "to *make the work* together with the author" confuses the different roles and freedoms of the artist and the audience. Their different roles and freedoms are realised through the shared definition of art – an artefact with intention. The object must be taken in that context in order to differentiate Pollock's drippings from the imprint of a hare's paw. It is not necessarily because it is presented in a gallery or a museum. This social historical setting may urge the audience to deal with the ambiguity of modern art, but ultimately what is within the picture frame needs to make sense. This making sense renders the work to be an intentional object in the way that things fall into place. Only then can the ambiguity of modern art present the audience with the possibility of aesthetic pleasure in free play with the unverifiable truth of the work.

For the relationship between intention and making sense of art, I return to Eco's correlation of "aesthetic pleasure" and "implicitly given form" (p. 100). The implicit giving of the form drives the viewer to examine the work on her own, within the space of looking into the picture. In this mode of pensiveness, she has to work on her looking in order to understand what is there, or to determine if there is anything there at all. Yet her work of contemplation is voluntary because of the same implicitness. It is up to the viewer to decide how much work should be devoted, and what is there. The freedom in the voluntary labour brings her aesthetic pleasure, which comes from the labour itself, not the reward of gaining what is there. The labour necessitates her looking, which requires her personal and intimate engagement with the work. The intention of the work is not in what it *says* but in what it *does* to that looking. It is the effect of what is on the surface,

¹¹ In such case, the artist will have to know the meaning before trying to refrain from fixing it. But how is it possible to do so when the meaning should not be predetermined?

which arouses at the moment of looking. Thus it is transitory. It does not belong to either the artist or the viewer, yet it belongs to both of them simultaneously.

The viewer's looking occurs in between the studium and the punctum, in Barthes's terms. The studium is explained as "an *average* human affect, almost from a certain training" (1982, p. 26). It is one's individual cultural participation in the readable figures, e.g. faces, gesture, settings, actions in the context shared in the public understanding. For example, we can read Vietnamese hats in a rice field as a connoted sign of the Vietnam war. "Punctum" is what the viewer creates/adds after reading the named signs. Barthes explains:

"The *studium* is ultimately always coded, the *punctum* is not. ... What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance. ... The effect is certain but unlocatable, it does not find its sign, its name" (1982, pp. 51-53). "[Punctum] is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*" (1982, p. 55).

Art stays on the border where the studium and the punctum overlap. When the viewer is too far away from the border, it is no longer about the particular work of art. In later years, after publication of *The Open Work*, Eco revised his statements:

"by stressing the role of the interpreter, I was not assuming that in an "open work" one can find that "everything" has been filled in by its different empirical readers, irrespective of or despite the properties of the textual objects. I was, on the contrary, assuming that an artistic text contained, among its major analyzable properties, certain structural devices that encourage and elicit interpretive choices. ... In *Opera aperta*, even though stressing the role of the interpreter ready to risk an ideal insomnia in order to pursue infinite interpretations, I was insisting that to interpret a text means to interpret *that* text, not one's own personal drives" (1990, pp. 50-51).

I relate Barthes's punctum to intuitive intention, and studium to conscious intention; but this applies only from the viewer's position at the opposite end from the artist. Intuitive intention is what the artist feels – the effect of seeing the mental image. In this context, the social contract between the artist and the audience, inducing intention in the audience's reception by the artist is redundant. Both the artist and the audience play their respective roles within the

boundary of openness. Yet the degree of openness cannot be set or defined as a specific quantity, but is indefinite in the process of being measured.

The artist's role is to complete the work as a meaningful/intentional object since it is supposed to be presented to her audiences. As much as she might wish them to pursue their freedom and responsibility on their part, the artist must pursue her freedom and responsibility on her own part. She must know why the work is the way it is. Only when it makes sense to her, can she expect the same for others. This differentiates free choices from random choices. Free choice is accompanied by one's responsibility for each choice as a form of life, as Pippin asserts, that "must be *actively* preserved and protected", by "actively taking a point of view or stand ... in an always challengeable and revisable way" (2005, p. 300). One must *actively* seek to be challenged and revised regarding one's choices. This requires that one must understand one's point of view or stance in order to be able to question why one thinks what one thinks.

How should we apply this to the open intention of open work regarding its rationale and the possibility that indefinite plural messages are not being predetermined? The problem lies in what we mean by intention in art. Despite their insight into the importance of intention/meaning in modernist art, part of the historical progression, this very basic question seems omitted in Pippin and Eco's arguments.

Eco does not distinguish different kinds of intention. He does not mention intuitive intention as such, nor does he discuss anything intuitive. He only deals with the artist's conscious, deliberate intention, which is a general meaning of "intention". Since Eco is referring to the conscious intention of the artist, the logic of intentional openness is dubious. The idea of a single, unified intention with two opposite qualities, i.e. deliberate and open, is contradictory. Having a deliberate intention contradicts the definition of openness. What does it mean to be *open* when "[a] work of art can be open only insofar as it remains a work; beyond a certain boundary, it becomes mere noise" (Eco, 1962, p. 100)? The artist has to set the boundary of openness, which requires her deliberate choices to decide how open the work should be, and in what ways.

Intention is finite as a human motive, a means to an end as in “a purpose of eating breakfast,” “the meaning of wearing a black dress at a funeral” or “an intention to go to a market”. Regarding intentional openness, the artist’s intention of leaving the work open or measuring the degree of openness is finite as an intention to the artist who intends. The act of leaving the work open does not remain as an end in itself, but serves the intention of leaving the work open. Whatever is intended, the act of realising it becomes a means to achieve the intention which was predetermined.

This finite, conscious intention does not satisfy the kind of intention that Eco claims. I call for intuitive intention, which I introduced earlier in the paper as a way to explain openness of the intention in art. Like an ordinary intention, this intention calls for our action in order to realise it. However, unlike an ordinary intention, we do not know what it is in advance. We see a possibility of what it is as we realise it. Knowing that something is there allows another kind of knowing: knowing what that something is. The former is given beyond one’s choice, whereas the latter is achieved by one’s articulation (through either speaking or making art) of that given knowledge. As one sees the colour red, the knowledge that it is red occurs simultaneously (given that one has the pre-established knowledge of the colour red). Only then can one think to oneself that it red. This gives one a feeling of knowing the colour red. This realisation of certain knowledge gives one the confirmation that one knows *it*. Thus, openness in the artist’s intention results from her not being able to know the given intention which is already within her, like Barthes’s punctum in the viewer’s gaze of a photograph. It is not chosen by her.

Eco’s intentional openness in pursuit of a field of possible interpretations can make sense only in this way. This intention is a property of the work itself, rather than something that can be controlled or owned by the artist. The work is where the artist and the audience meet without ever meeting each other person to person. Looking at the work, they meet each other by projecting the other in opposite directions in time – the audience into the past and the artist into the future. The artist deals with what will happen, and the audience with what has already happened. Intention for the artist becomes meaning for the audience. The meaning of the work has been set by the artist in advance through its finite

physical presence, but there is no way for the audience to verify it in any specific terms. It is regenerated and becomes something new at each encounter thus never settled. It occurs in the present participle as it is being interpreted in that self-contained space of beholding, between the work and the beholder. This is also applied to the artist. The un-predefined intention, in its emergence, guides the artist through the course of making art. It is definite, but continuously regenerated into different versions of the same intention each time. What the audience may find is the trace of this regeneration guided by the latent, yet definite sense of intention. Therefore, for the artist, what matters is the visibility or clarity of the intention found in the work, working through the regeneration of the intention, not whether it is open or closed.

Given that art is intrinsically open, and communicability is a new criterion, a logical reaction would be to close out the interpretation of the work. Modernist art's failure in this enterprise lies in what it tries to convey and the mode of its communication; the meaning of the work is the work itself (the disposition and the organisation of the visual surface), and art does not explain, but merely shows itself. The work invites the viewer to examine it within its internal context without any references to the world outside the picture frame. One must look across the formation on the surface in order to form the "distinct sort of meaning" (2005, p. 289) which Pippin mentions. Indescribability provokes continuous articulation of the looking. In order for the viewer to appreciate or acquire aesthetic pleasure from the manner in which the painterly gestures are formulated, she must be able to make sense out of what she sees. This is not necessarily to demand that the viewer find what the artist has intended, but that she investigate her own seeing and make the best of it.

On the artist's part, she must find a form that makes sense as a sign referring to itself – a pointer which points to itself. So the sign itself has to be purposeful without any other purpose or meaning apart from itself. This kind of making sense is the way the artist can measure the degree of openness, if we can call it that. Only in this way can we differentiate Pollock's dripping painting from accidental paint drippings. Measuring openness is not about leaving the work intentionally open, but about narrowing the openness, which is innate to art, by organising the surface. In order to do this, the artist should ask the same

questions as her audience about her own seeing. This highlights the imperative requirement for art, for modernism and beyond, of self-understanding of what one sees in the work. We are back to the plane of self-consciousness, yet with a gap to fill in.

There does not seem to be a problem with Pippin's analogy between abstraction in modernist painting on the one hand, and the rising interest in the individual and the historical imperative towards self-understanding and self-determination on the other. In this analogy, painting, abstaining from its previous function of representing – or referring to – the external world, takes itself as its main concern and central question, and thus it becomes a concept of painting. However, the nature of this concept, is problematic.

We are no longer dealing with what is depicted on the surface, but with the way the two dimensional surface is treated in terms of organising the visual elements. Clive Bell's "significant form" can be the functional equivalent to this. He defines it as an essential quality that all works of visual art share and which gives them aesthetic power. "In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions" (1982, p. 68). However, Bell's "significant form" does not include the artist's involvement in generating the significance of the form.

Eco (1990) identifies it independently by the name of *intentio operis* (the intention of the work), distinct from *intentio auctoris* (the intention of the author) and *intentio lectoris* (the intention of the reader), in a schema of textual communication. He explains:

"The text's intention is not displayed by the textual surface. Or, if it is displayed, it is so in the sense of the purloined letter. One has to decide to 'see' it. Thus it is possible to speak of text's intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text's intention" (1992, p. 64).

In a similar vein, Aloïs Riegl (2004) coined the term "will of art" (*kunstwollen*). The definition of this term is still in debate. Nonetheless, the consensus is that it does not belong to the artist's (conscious) intention or will, or to a social or

historical will, but it is grounded in art's formal and visual element or language within the work (p. 13). It functions as the impersonal driving force which allows art's visual elements to evolve. According to him, art is the result of "a specific and consciously purposeful *Kunstwollen*" (p. 14), prior to function, material or technique, in a struggle with the material.¹²

Riegl, who, like Pippin, was influenced by Hegel, offers a different view from Pippin's regarding the involvement of nature in art. The latter focuses on Hegel's "role in shifting aesthetic appreciation from one founded on taste, beauty, and pleasure to one concerned with criticism, meaning, and a kind of self-education" (p. 290). Pippin emphasises that Hegel is indifferent to nature and beauty, and repeats Hegel's remark that "Nature is simply 'spiritless,' *geistlos*, or without meaning, even boring" (p. 289). Nature does not carry much importance in the discussions of Pippin and his Hegel.

By comparison, Riegl positions art in a middle ground between the historical unfolding of (Hegelian) Spirit and its technical function, as the formal character of "artistic thought" (*Kunstgedanke*). This differs from Pippin's Hegelian view of art as a product of history. Riegl sees that art belongs to history, yet is partly independent from it. He explains "the creation of art is a contest with nature with the aim of bringing to expression a harmonious worldview" (p. 300). Creating art is to aim for "a certain idea or conception of nature", thus to gain harmony by recreating "nature as he would like it to be and as it indeed exists in his mind" (p. 299). Speaking of the relationship of form and surface (Chapter 6), Riegl points out that what is natural in nature is the same as what is natural in art. An art object innately possesses its objective surface, which manifests itself externally and internally. The artist actually works with the surface which the audience will then see; when perceived it becomes the subjective surface. He recognises that the beholder of art is in a passive mode of receiving sensorial and cerebral stimuli, yet at the same time is in an active mode of interpreting the stimuli according to her world view.

There is more than a century separating Pippin and Riegl, and they belong to different fields, philosophy and art history. In addition, Riegl did not see the

¹² His response to Gottfried Semper's mechanistic characterisation of the work of art in *Der Stil* (Style).

upsurge of abstraction in art. However, despite his arguable outdatedness, his mysterious combination of reason and nature offers an important perspective, which may provide the basic layout of the kind of intuitive intention we are searching for.

This leaves me with some reservations about Pippin's conception of self-consciousness in relation to abstraction in art. To him, "abstraction" means "abstraction from dependence on sensual immediacy" (p. 304). In particular, the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition in which he sets his position denies "any immediate presence to the mind" (p. 2).

Even though we accept that abstraction in art signals abandonment of representation, which he relates to the sensibility of nature, it is not an easy assumption that the self can be reduced and dematerialized to a concept, especially given the inevitable physicality involved in painting and looking. Most of all, it is not all that clear what he means by "nature" and "the self", and how much they overlap.

This is not to say that Pippin does not consider nature to be part of the self, and thus part of art. Hegel did not give up on nature, and Pippin recalls Hegel's prognosis that nature "will be not lost or rendered a mere object ... but transformed, remade into a 'second nature'" (p. 291). Thus, nature is not rejected, but transformed into part of the human world. And such transformation, as Pippin explains Hegel's argument, is exemplified by "the habits of mind and unreflective practices of 'ethical life' (Sittlichkeit)" (p. 291). Within this framework, Pippin argues, abstraction in modernist art is timely, appropriate for "the achievement of those habits of mind, sorts of lived embodiment" (p. 291).

The idea of second nature may well explain the practice of making art. An artist's painterly character or artistic personality is formed through practice, through which the artist repeats the same gestures yet in different ways each time. This practice allows her to refine or morph her given first nature into embodied habits of second nature at her will, towards its perfection. It is achieved, as Pippin emphasises, not merely given. Thus the notion of second nature can be hardly omitted from the practice of making art, and modernist abstract art is not an exception. Furthermore, as modernist art takes art itself as its subject,

embodiment of second nature plays a more important role to form the “distinct sort of meaning” in art. It is meaning embodied in and through the physical body of the work.

However, Pippin excludes this role of nature in modernist art. Here is another instance of Pippin’s attempt to explain abstract art in terms of “the Hegelian prolegomena”: “on the way to an adequate expression of human freedom ... for example, in a painting the object ‘does not remain an actual spatial natural existent, but becomes a reflection [*Widerschein*] of spirit.’ The ‘real’ is thus said to be ‘canceled’ and transformed into something ‘in the domain of spirit for the apprehension by spirit’ (which natural objects are not)” (p. 290). In this, “the real” becomes synonymous with “nature”. Whatever “the real” is, it is something that should be apprehended by spirit, which is separate from that of nature. Pippin’s interpretation of Hegel in the following excerpt should give more clarification:

“What Hegel describes is a much more practical struggle with the natural world, such that the achievement of various forms of real independence from natural determination is reflected in the self-images manifested in art. ... we have *broken* free of a fundamental dependence on such sensible images not so much because of *their* inadequacy as because of *our* having made ourselves independent of them, and art must be understood as part and parcel of that work. Again, none of this means that we become or realize we always were supernatural beings or that we can now ignore our corporeality. We remain finite, constrained in all the obvious ways by natural limitations. But the experience of, the very meaning of, such naturality is now to be regarded as a human achievement” (2005, p. 292).

Nature, in this meaning, is the world of matter, including our corporeality and its faculties of sense. It is the world that determines our lives without our choosing. It is the world of struggle from which we have to break free in order to gain our independence. What is crucial is his (and Hegel’s) basic frame of the antithetical relationship between nature and spirit, and the role of the latter, which operates the self-determination of rational apprehension. Even though Pippin gives a favourable (modern) spin, his recapitulation of Hegel makes it clear that Hegel was not so sympathetic to nature.

“fine art, and especially its history, ... should be understood as a *liberation from nature*, not a rejection of its (or our) inherent inadequacy but the

achievement of a mode of self-understanding and self-determination no longer set, or limited by nature as such, as well as a humanizing transformation of the natural into a human world. (Art is said to enable a 'free subject' to 'strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself' (A, 31).)" (Pippin, 2005, p. 290).¹³

In this context of nature, abstraction in art is understood to be part of our human achievement which renders our nature as our own, rather than being not at the mercy of the natural world.

What concerns me here is not the distinction between nature and spirit, but the relationship between the two, and the sequential process of self-consciousness; the self draws itself out of nature in order to move to the state of self-consciousness operated by spirit, and then returns to nature. In respect to this separation between nature and the self in the operation of self-consciousness, Pippin proposes that "we are better off leaving nature out of the picture all together" (p. 189), and that we should "work within a basic distinction between spirit and nature" and concentrate on "'the labor of the Concept' in time" as "a kind of historical achievement" (p. 201).

In this practical suggestion, Pippin emphasises that if we ever want to reconcile with nature, it "must be achieved rather than recovered" through "an active negation in some way of the 'power' of sensuousness and 'imprisonment' in nature (not, it should be stressed, of 'nature' as such)" (p. 291). In this scenario, he sees abstract art as an artistic achievement of self-making, a "nondiscursive" example of self-consciousness, which allows him to make the following point:

"Representational art cannot adequately express the full subjectivity of experience, the wholly self-legislating, self-authorizing status of the norms that constitute such subjectivity, or, thus, cannot adequately express who we (now) are" (p. 300).

There cannot be much debate about the historical demand that the wholly self-legislating, self-authorizing self should be realised. However, Pippin's propositions make me wonder where the self is located. If the self is abstracted from nature,

¹³ The original text is in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts* (1975, 2 vols., translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon).

hen how can the wholly self-legislating, self-authorising self in art exist? I
question the foundation of his inquiries.

3. Formalised Figuration

To test my reservations about Pippin's theory, I examine some of the artists that he mentions. In particular, Pippin takes Cézanne as an example of "the Hegelian prolegomena" (p. 304); "the constituent elements of painterly meaning begin to ... be now thematized as such ... to make sense as a painting, a material 'image,' a new way of capturing the mind-world relation (a spontaneity-in-receptivity)" (p. 303). The reason is "because and only because a lot of other aspects of political, religious, and philosophical life have come to make sense, to succeed in invoking a norm, in analogous, interconnected new ways, too" (pp. 303-304). The latter part, what Pippin calls "the Hegelian prolegomena", is the historical situation of the modern world in which Pippin positions abstractionism in art. It is the world based on rational self-determination (without the natural part of the self), and normalisation of that self-consciousness, and Pippin sees abstractionism as its artistic manifestation. In this view, he associates Cézanne with Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian in the early part of the twentieth century, and to Rothko and Pollock in 1950s America. However, I distinguish early modernists' paintings of formalised figuration, as in the work of Cézanne, Matisse or Picasso, from subsequent abstract paintings. Formalised figuration occurs in the embryonic stage of abstract art at a specific moment, at the intersection of representation and non-representation. This moment is the focus of my interest, because it may tell us why abstraction was chosen and not the other options.

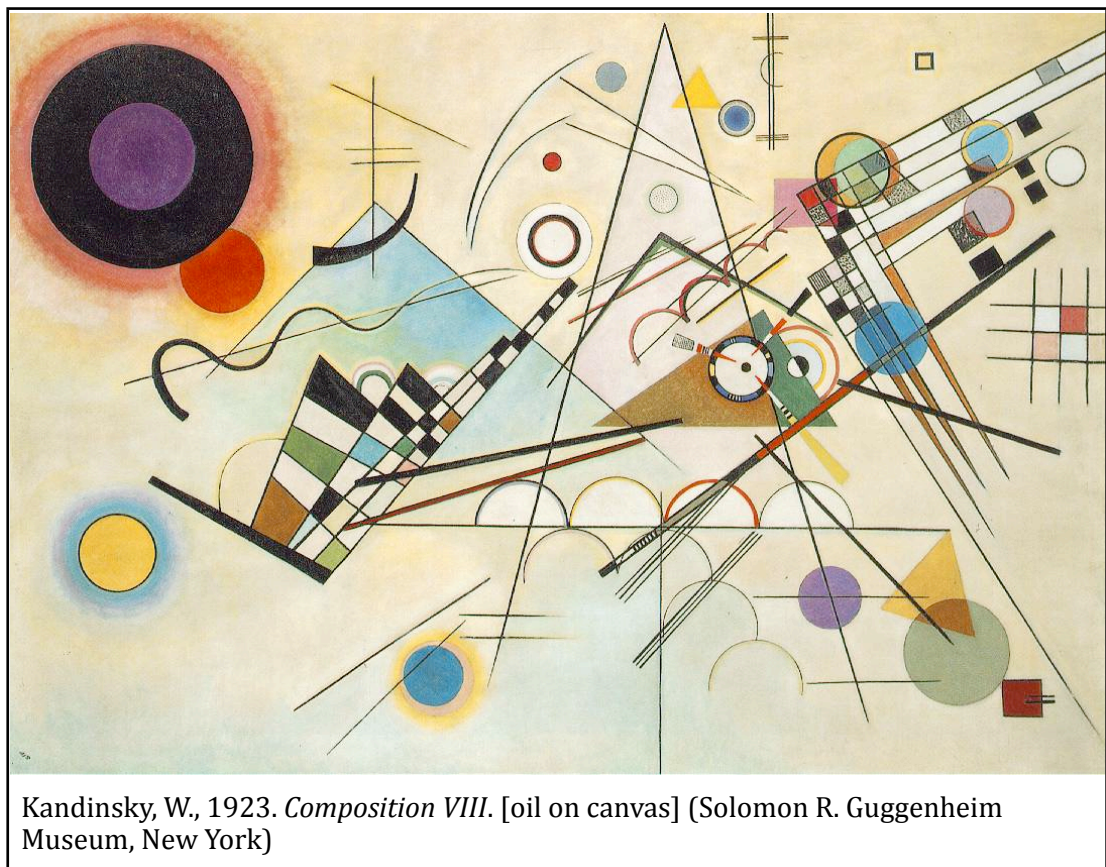
One thing we can gather is that these painters of early modernism endeavoured to achieve non-representation, but they were not yet giving up on figurative shapes. This kind of work plays dual roles. The painting always contains some kind of reference to life, and yet it still remains as a painting. It constitutes formalised signs of the painter, while, at the same time, it represents something, e.g. tree, table, window etc. The painting does not easily hand the spectator over to the world of representation. It stands between the spectator and the represented. Its physical presence becomes the signs of the painter. We often emphasise colours for Matisse and tactility for Cézanne, but these constitutional characteristics cannot by themselves make the unique sign of the painter.



Painting is no longer a labour of representation, but of presentation. Figures in the painting do not resemble specific persons, events or things, but work as general concepts to aid in presenting the specific event of painting at a given time. The generality of the subject frees the viewer's gaze from the subject matter, while providing a common denominator into which she can place herself from her particular position. The apples or the chairs in the painting are no longer specific apples or chairs, but general apples or chairs. They evoke the general concept of apple or chair as the words "apple" or "chair" do, depending on the degree of generality or abstraction (whichever word is used). However, while they serve a major function in verbal communication, the general concepts play an ancillary role in painting. The question is not what the figure is, but how it effects seeing. Painting focuses on how the subject is depicted – its specific manifestation of the

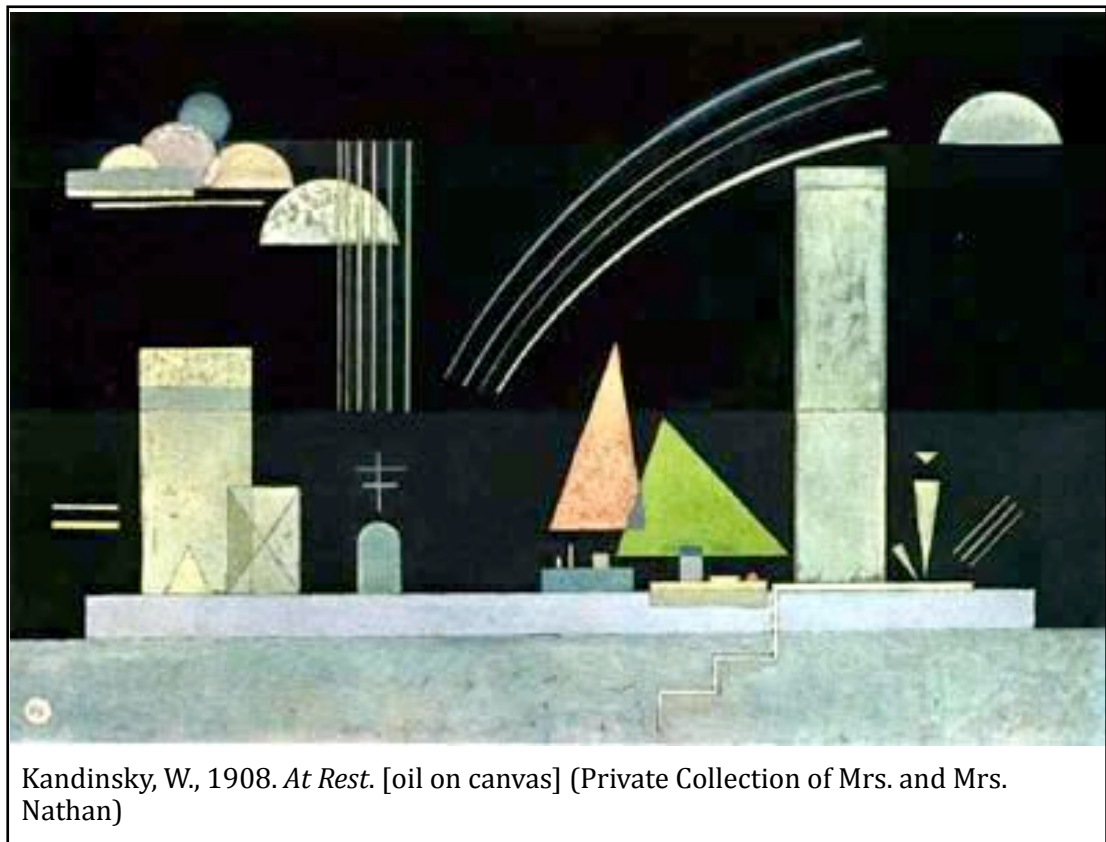
unspecified general subject. The viewer hovers between the physical substance of the work and the familiar identity of the subject, in a loose interplay between seeing and registering that seeing. The figures facilitate the painter's pictorial signs through the physical presence of the brush marks.

Even Matisse's *The Snail* (*L'Escargot*, 1953), which is supposedly one of his most abstract works, refers to life. The title acts as a key to making sense out of the otherwise simple assemblage of plain coloured paper patches. It allows one to see the body of the snail from the curve created by the set of patches in the centre, and the white sun from the white background with large patches of green and blue.



In contrast to geometric abstract paintings, for which geometrical shapes were introduced as a strategic choice, to serve ideological philosophies, abstraction in the early modernist paintings of formalised figuration seems to be simply a consequence of shifting from an image of representation to an act of painting. We can distinguish Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso more for their particular treatments of the canvas than for their subject matter. However, we may ask the same question about Kandinsky (The Bauhaus), Malevich (Suprematism) or Mondrian

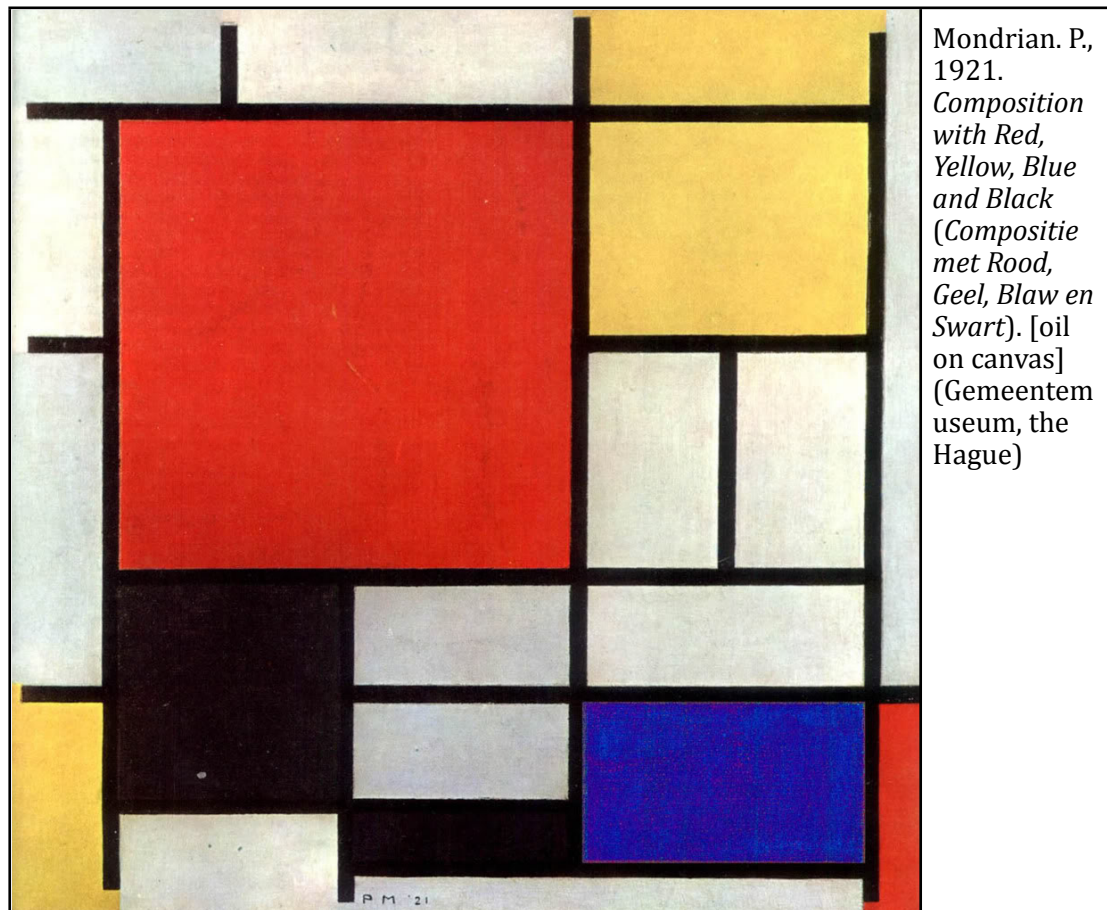
(De Stijl). Can we distinguish their styles? It may not be as easy as with the paintings of formalised figuration, but certainly we can.



Now let me compare two sets of paintings by Kandinsky and Mondrian, i.e. Kandinsky's *Composition VIII* (1923) and *At Rest* (1928), and Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black* (1921) and *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43). Kandinsky's *Composition VIII* reverberates with his earlier work *At Rest*. The half-moon in *At Rest* becomes various versions of the sun in *Composition VIII*. In addition, both paintings show certain objects that Kandinsky repeats in many of his paintings at various points of his career: clouds in half circles, mountains in triangles, rainbows in arches and buildings in vertical rectangles. Something similar happens with Mondrian.

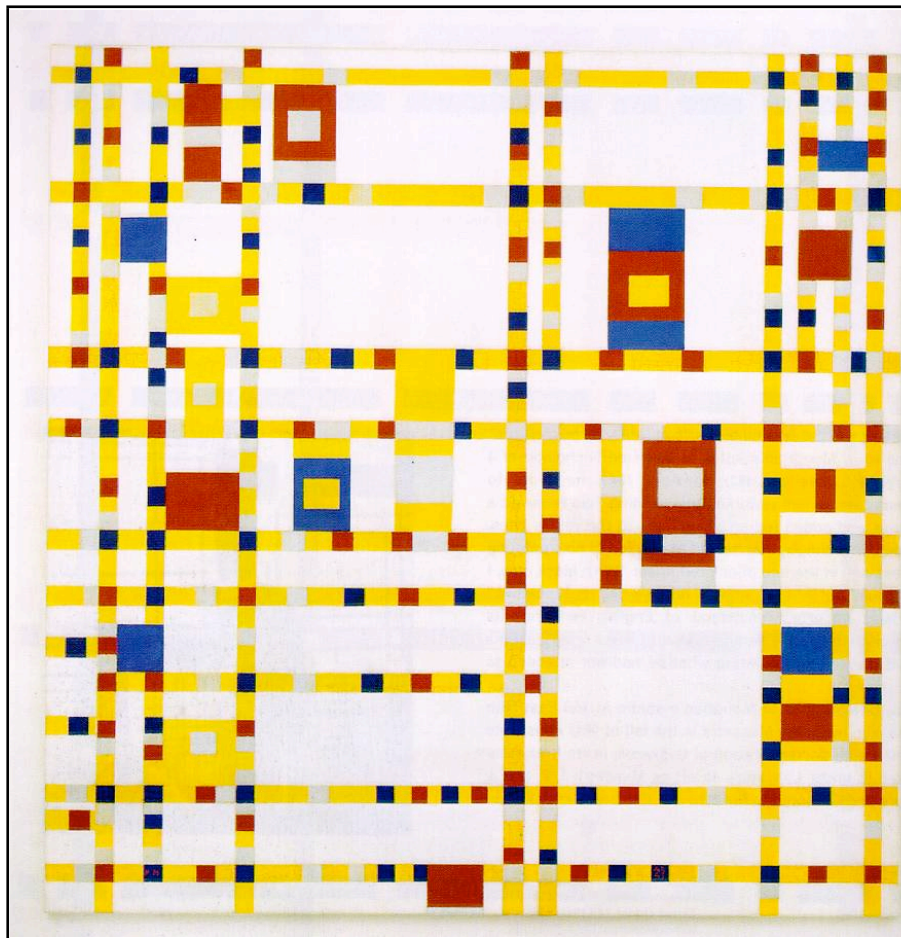
As an experiment, I may re-title *Composition VIII* as *Picnic in Spring* and *At Rest* as *Composition XIII*, and in the same way *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black* as *No. 6 Street* and *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black No. 2*. With a title like *Picnic in Spring* or *No. 6 Street*, we can then see a phenomenon similar to what happens with Matisse's *The Snail*. At least, we may find ourselves trying to associate the title to what we see in the painting. The

division between abstraction and representation cannot be as sharply drawn, and the abstract paintings fail to be purely non-representational. Painting stays between the two poles of abstraction and representation, only in varying configurations of the two. This illustrates the difficulty with absencing the artist's individual signature in painting and confirms the impossibility of being purely non-representational.



What interests me about these paintings of geometric abstraction is the function of the title. What derives the distinction between a self-referential title, e.g. *Composition VIII* or *Red, Yellow, Blue and Black*, and a referential title, e.g. *At Rest* or *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, which have similarly abstract looks? To answer this, I take Mondrian's *Trafalgar Square* (1939-43) as the subject of another thought experimentation. It does not look much different from his other paintings, with self-referencing titles, e.g. *Red, Yellow, Blue and Black*. As is the case with Matisse's *The Snail*, Mondrian's *Trafalgar Square* (the painting itself that we see) invokes nothing of what is read in the title. This highlights the importance of the title for a work with a high degree of abstraction such as this. It inevitably forces the viewer

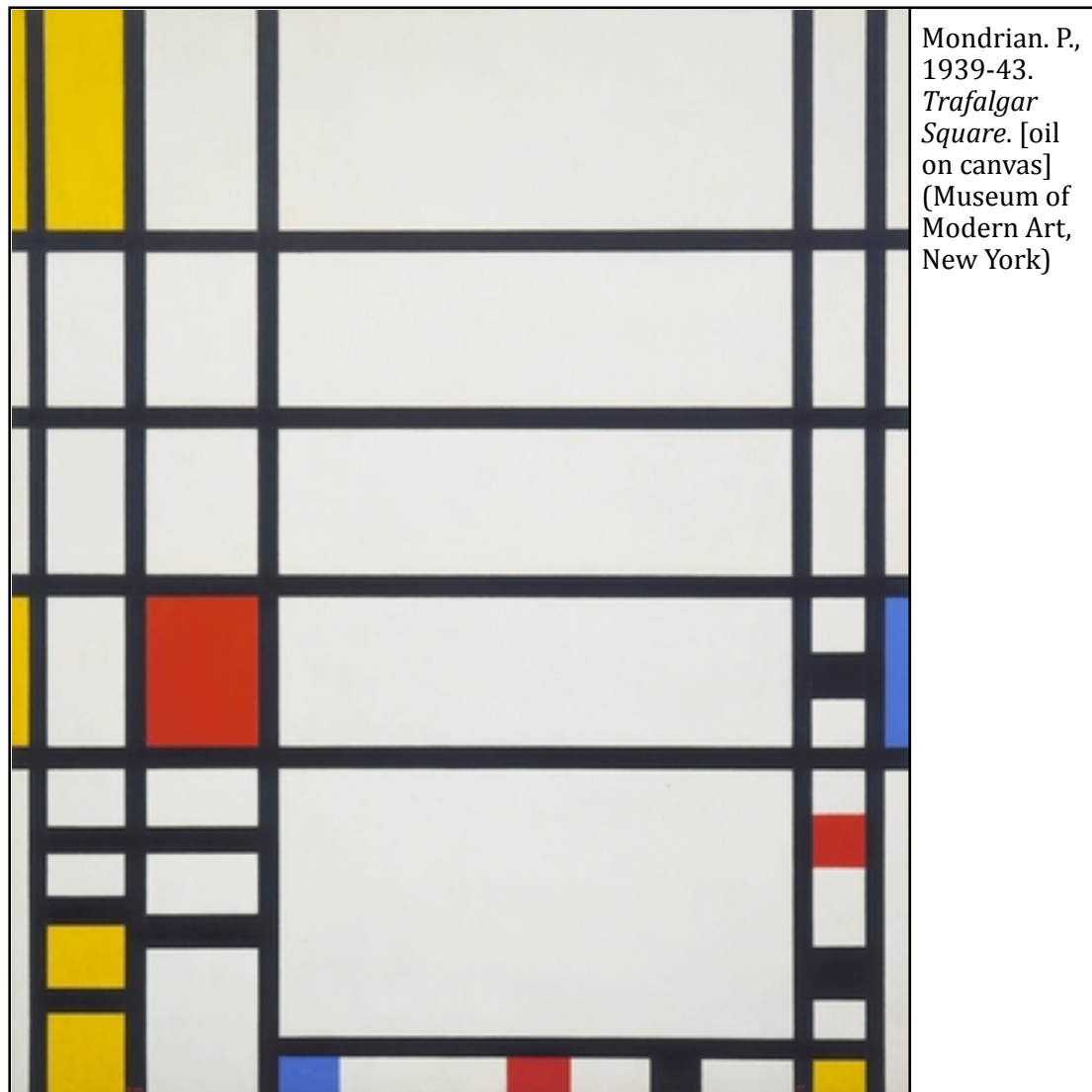
to see Trafalgar Square (the landmark) through an otherwise plain composition with red, yellow, blue and black.



Mondrian, P., 1942-43. *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. [oil on canvas] (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

As much as Cézanne's tree, table and vase or Matisse's window, dancers and goldfish, the title *Trafalgar Square* functions as a point of reference intentionally chosen by the artist for an audience. Though all these titles work differently in regard to the reception of the paintings, they fulfil the same basic function, including the title *Red, Yellow, Blue and Black*. The finitude of the words lets the title direct the viewer to what those works refer to as a point of her inquiry. The words "Red", "Yellow", "Blue" and "Black" refer to the general concepts of the colours, as recognisable images of apple and chair in formalised figuration refer to the general concepts of apple and chair. As art becomes more and more abstract, a title plays a more important role. In the absence of figurativeness in the image, the title plays the role of a figure – a point of reference to life where the viewer and the artist share a common understanding. However, understanding the painting's subject matter (i.e. Trafalgar Square) cannot be the answer to her inquiry. The title lets the viewer associate what she sees on the surface of the painting with

what it refers to, and self-examine why what she sees is related to that reference (i.e. the actual Trafalgar Square). The image of the painting roams around the degree of abstraction, between pure representation and pure abstraction.



The effect of formalised figuration is also found in East Asian scholar paintings (prior to modernisation). In *A Theory of Cloud* (2002), Hubert Damisch calls this effect “double attention – attention paid to the text of nature, and attention paid to the picture as a text” (p. 227). The relinquishment of outline is a salient point in bridging early modernist painting and East Asian scholar painting. Damisch explains this absence of outline may explain both the abstract quality of East Asian painting and the shift Cézanne initiated in abstract art – from an image to a picture – through the break from an “illusion of depth” to “the flat surface of the picture” (p. 226).

I am aware that I am tapping into Damisch's huge speculation, which does not consider much of East Asian traditions and philosophies (Daoism and Buddhism, in particular) which form the contexts of East Asian paintings. Also, the Western terms he uses to explain East Asian painting cause confusion; for example, outline. Thus, Damisch's arguments should be considered as his adaptation of some East Asian ideas for the purposes of his art-theoretical exploration in Western art, not for his historical account of East Asian painting. Only in the former context does his comparison of East Asian painting and Cézanne's painting make sense for our purposes of theoretical exploration of formalised figuration in early modernist painting.

Damisch observes that East Asian painting does not have the notion of outline, which in western painting is a graphic method of conveying the message of the image (p. 207), in its relation to engraving. It would be more correct to say that what can be regarded as an outline or a line in East Asian painting is a thin brush stroke versus a broad brush stroke. This idea of stroke in East Asian scholar painting emphasises the act of painting, which allows the ink and the brush to be at work, instead of compositional elements such as dot, line and plane, which apply to Western conceptions of art. Thin or thick lines are only different results of the same brush stroke, depending on how they are executed.

An outline in western art is a line with a specific role. It indicates closure of a shape as a thing. Unlike an ordinary line, at its beginning, it sets what it will become. As Damisch explains in Alberti's theory, "outline is limited to the surface that it denotes ... can guarantee no grip upon a practice that, in truth, is regarded from the point of view of *productivity* rather than from that of its products" (p. 206). It is more concerned with the shape than with the act of shaping. Damisch finds the significance of the absence of outlines in Cézanne's paintings in this productivity of painting. This is also noted by Merleau-Ponty in his study of Cézanne.¹⁴ He says no outline means no shape, and no shape means depriving "the objects of their identity" (1993, p. 65).

The absence of outlines could also mean that the artist no longer has the obligation of "naming". The objects are still identifiable, but become anonymous.

¹⁴ This is not so surprising, since Damisch studied with Merleau-Ponty.

The same can be said for East Asian painting. Certain objects, such as cloud, mountain, bamboo and the moon, are thematically reiterated, but their specific identity is not within the artist's control or responsibility. Then what can be the function or the reason for these figures in the paintings? I recall Eco's comments on image.

“not every semantic marker can be verbalized. When semantic markers can be verbalized they have undoubtedly acquired a maximum of abstraction; previously culturalized and frequently expressed through verbal devices, ... through the mediation of verbal habits they can easily be detected” (1979, p. 247).

The figures in the paintings function as semantic markers that can be verbalised, such as Cézanne's tree, table and vase, and Matisse's window, dancers and goldfish. They are “previously culturalized and frequently expressed through verbal devices, ... through the mediation of verbal habits they can easily be detected”. They are easily detectable common objects in the public imagination, and they function as general concepts. The looseness of their generality guides the viewer's attention in a certain direction without specific information about the subject matter¹⁵, and serves to deliver the artist's particularity in the formation of painting that subject matter.

A passage from Italo Calvino may clarify this. Calvino appreciates the economy, rhythm, and hard logic in folk tales and fairy tales: “The technique of oral narration in the popular tradition follows functional criteria. It leaves out unnecessary details but stresses repetition: for example, when the tale consists of a series of the same obstacles to be overcome by different people” (1988, p. 35). Being used to the pattern of folk tales, a listener understands the re-occurrence of the same pattern without the same amount of explanation as the first time. Repetition speeds up the progress of story and gives a rhythmical pattern in the telling. This can be compared to the repetition of some musical themes in a song, or to rhymed phrases in a poem. While those rhymes and rhythms create temporal sensations to our ears, the repetition in story telling gives rhythms in our imagination. As Calvino puts it, “a child's pleasure in listening to stories lies

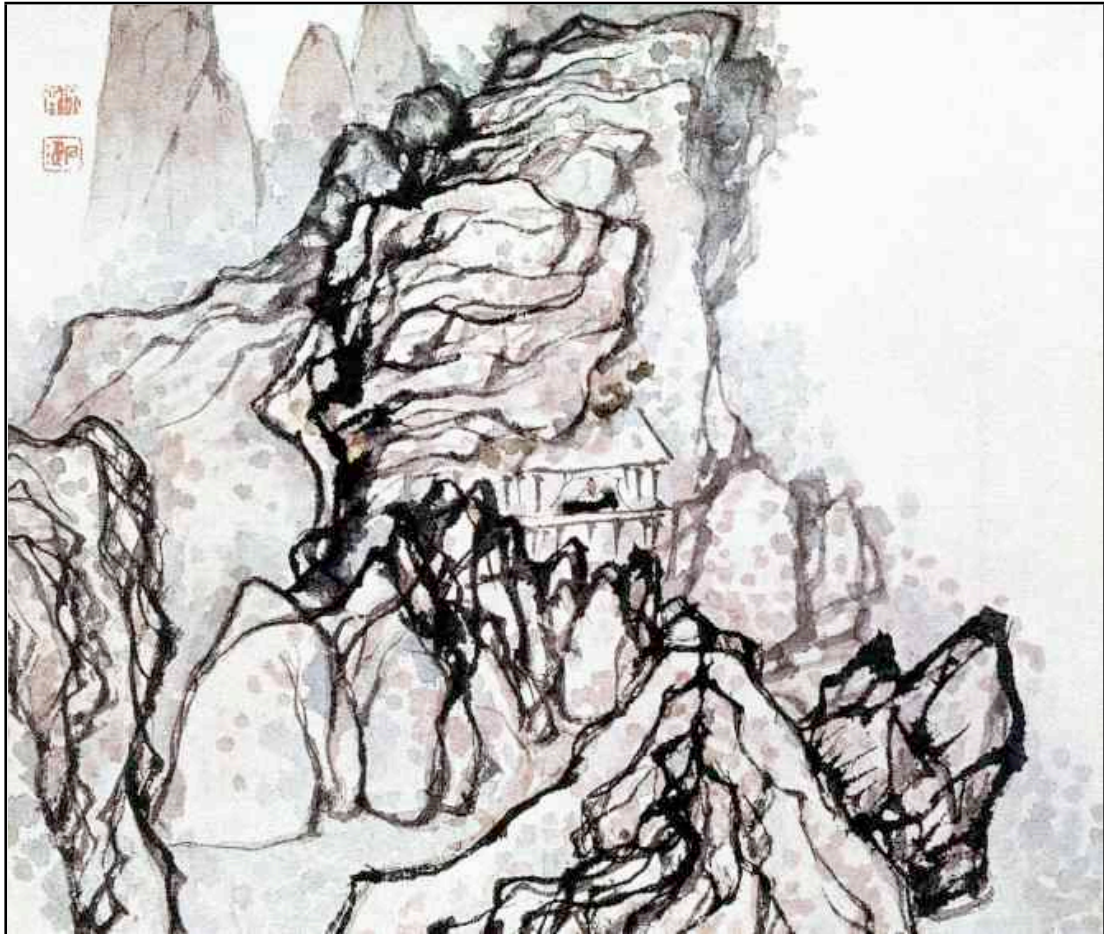
¹⁵ When we hear “apple” or “chair”, we get a general idea of apple or chair, rather than thinking of a specific apple or chair.

partly in waiting for things he expects to be repeated: situations, phrases, formulas.” This pleasure can be related to Calvino’s metaphor of riding a horse: “The novella is a horse, a means of transport with its own pace, a trot or a gallop according to the distance and the ground it has to travel over” (1988, p. 39). The speed is a mental speed, and it characterises the journey of experiencing a story. The pleasant riding has the familiar rhythm and style of the horse’s trotting.

Calvino’s notion of repetition can be compared to Eco’s redundancy. Eco gives the example of the words on a Christmas card and vowels in a word (1962, pp. 51-52). As in the word “building,” what we are concerned with is the consonants of “bldg.” The vowels, “uii,” are inserted to make pronunciation smooth and comprehension easier. The words on a Christmas card serve to indicate it is a Christmas card. Understanding the information of the words is not essential for the purpose.

In the same way, the figures in the paintings of formalised figuration require no special attention from the viewer’s eyes, but leave something for the viewer to hang onto in the background of her attention, and provide the rhythm or mood of reading the physicality of painting. The painting does not represent the objects, but presents the act of painting them. Like a folk tale, pleasure does not come from what is painted, but from the way it is painted. Familiarity of the objects facilitates the journey – the journey of experiencing the painting. Familiar objects of mountain, table and tree appear again and again, yet differently each time. Elimination of outlines allows the brush to be free from depicting the objects and thus, free to paint them.

4. Wu-Wei vs Self-Expression



Shitao. late 17th century. *Man in a House beneath a Cliff*. C.C. Wang Family Collection.

The act of painting was much appreciated by pre-modern East Asian scholar painters. Damisch introduces Shitao's notion of the unique brush stroke (*yi hua*: 一畫)¹⁶, and underlines the “correlative duality” (p. 212) of brush and ink in Chinese painting. He explains: “Chinese theory does not recognize any separation such as the European ‘iconological’ tradition makes between the ‘body’ and the ‘soul’ of an image” (p. 213). Likewise, “neither the ink nor the brush can be reduced to elements, formal components” (p. 207); but they are rather like “complementary productive principles” (p. 207) as “flesh and bone” (p. 209) which work together. Then, he correlates Tang Zhiqi's notion of “a specific

¹⁶ The unique brush stroke (*yi hua*) is not Shitao's own idea, as Damisch assumes, but is more his term for a general attitude in East Asian painting among learned scholars.

signifying practice”¹⁷ with the notion of the unique brush stroke. He asserts: “It is on the basis of that specificity, of the difference upon which it is founded as a signifying practice, that painting should be considered in its relationship to reality – a relationship of understanding rather than expression, of analogy rather than duplication, of working rather than substitution” (p. 224).



Shitao. late
17th century.
Bamboo shoots.

¹⁷ Also, the idea of “a specific signifying practice” is not a philosophical invention of Tang Zhiqi, though Damisch gives him full credit for it. Instead, it should be taken as Tang Zhiqi’s manifestation of the philosophical foundations of pre-modern East Asian thinking.

The notions of the unique brush stroke (*yi hua*) and the specific signifying practice foreground the pictorial production of painting and its theoretical formula of the synthesis between the ink (technical training) and the brush (life) (p. 213). Damisch relates this synthesis of the ink and the brush to that of yin/yang in that the indistinct fusion of yin and yang in the original chaos is cleared by the unique brush stroke, and the efficacious pair of yin and yang “corresponds to the classification of all aspects of reality and their universal alternation, for the order of the world results from interaction between the two sets of complementary aspects” (p. 215). The paired ideas of ying and yang can be conceived in a complicated way, but I will go with a simple and rather unsophisticated version. Ying and yang are words for the conceptual principle that defines existence of a thing out of the original chaos [the one]. One innately contains the other in its own definition. Yang can be understood as such only because of the opposite concept of ying. For example, the concept of night contains that of day in its definition. In their working relationship, the brush cannot be defined as such without the ink, and vice versa. In order for them to manifest their nature, the act of the brush stroke is required.

I stress that the act of manifesting nature in East Asian painting is not active, but rather passive in the sense that it is to be allowed to be manifested, not to manifest. This can be explained by two analogous dimensions of the unique brush stroke or “a specific signifying practice” in East Asian scholar painting: the painter as a unique individual, and the brush stroke as a unique occasion. Shitao’s claim for his creative independence is well known. Yet, the uniqueness of the individual painter remains within the tradition of painting, as Damisch emphasises. He stresses that only those who studied the ancients could gain the freedom of “transformation ” or “conversion”, by making changes to the preestablished field of painting (p. 205). To put it differently, each person is endowed with a unique nature. Even though the painter is trained in the same tradition of painting as others, the tradition is digested differently according to the painter’s nature. At the same time, without the training, he is like a child who is given only the potential for a unique nature, not the nature itself. Endless repetition and ritual practice of the same gesture and the same discipline bring out the given nature.

But, there is no notion equivalent to the Western idea of creation or originality as such, only cultivation of innate uniqueness through the discipline of painting.

Once the painter is at ease with the ink through technical training, he can give free reign to “the spirit of the brush” (p. 213). Here the word “spirit” does not have the same meaning as in the Western sense. By comparison, I introduce Hegel’s notion of Spirit in the section, The Principle of Inner Subjectivity:

“By this elevation of the spirit to itself the spirit wins in itself its objectivity, which hitherto it had to seek in the external and sensuous character of existence, and in this unification with itself it senses and knows itself. ... For at the stage of romantic art the spirit knows that its truth does not consist in its immersion in corporeality; on the contrary, it only becomes sure of its truth by withdrawing from the external into its own intimacy with itself and posing external reality as an existence inadequate to itself” (Hegel, 1835, Vol. 1, p. 518).

Hegel’s Spirit works as an object of *a thing*, and is separate from or rather hostile to “external reality”. The East Asian meaning of spirit is closer to life or dynamism in movement, and is not a thing per se. The Chinese word “qi” is often used to describe this. Damisch translates it as “breath”. It is “the movement of life (*sheng dong*)” (p. 214) that allows the brush to find its ways through the ink (trained technique) with its full immersion in the moment of the execution. Damisch highlights receptivity as a central point for the working of the brush stroke – “painting is a matter not of imitation, but of reception, and is founded on a dialectic of *hospitality*, in which each term successively adopts the position of host (*Zhu*) and guest (*bin*), a dialectic that governs the relations between the ink and the brush ” (p. 213). Reception requires attentiveness to each passing moment, through which the spirit understands itself “in its immersion in corporeality”. There are no repeated brush strokes, and each stroke is a singular and decisive gesture towards perfection allowing the spirit to newly unfold at each moment. The Japanese notion of Ichi-go ichi-e (一期一会: one time, one meeting), which is linked with Zen Buddhism, and particularly with the Japanese tea ceremony, sums up the importance of the transient moment of execution.¹⁸ The execution is

¹⁸ It is not a theory in the western sense, but more like a cultural concept which guides one in a certain manner of behaviour.

determined by one's capacity to receive it *well*. It requires an active mode of reception with everything considered. The breath (the working of the brush stroke) should be let out spontaneously and effortlessly in its harmony with the ink and the brush. The harmony is formed when the ink and the brush are balanced according to their nature. In the quest for the balance of harmony, the mind should be able to see how the spirit unfolds in its correlation with corporeality. This seeing is possible only by the execution of the brush stroke in the present without thinking of the past or the future. In simultaneous correspondence of execution and reception, each unique brush stroke then contributes to the unfolding of the uniqueness of the painter.

The Daoist concept of wu-wei (non-action) may help to explain this mindful yet empty-minded state of the brush stroke. I must stress that we should treat this idea as a cultural concept that is embedded and practised in tradition rather than a philosophical idea invented by an individual, e.g. Hegel's self-consciousness. It is more like practical wisdom than a theory per se. Even though there are some historically recorded originators, i.e. Lao-zi and Zhuang-zi, the ideas of the Dao have been sculpted over generations, travelled to different regions of East Asia, and adapted to the local cultures and existing belief systems, just like the very concept of the Dao. Thus East Asian scholar painting does not adhere to a single set of beliefs and practices of the Dao. However, for the purposes of this paper, I take the idea of wu-wei as one way to explain the thought process and execution of East Asian painting.

The concept of wu (nothing/non-being), which means inner emptiness of non-ego, is a recurring theme throughout most East Asian philosophies and religions, and is routinely mentioned without further explanation. The idea of nothing is paired with that of the self as its counterpart (as with those of ying and yang). Nothing does not exist in the actual world. It is always nothing relative to something. It is absence or removal of something, depending on whether that something is desired or disliked. In the general and practical terms of average people, the concept of wu is simplified to mean removal of one's ego, i.e. value judgements of likes and dislikes or good and bad, fashioned by each individual's particular situation and cultural and social backgrounds. Its explanation on a more philosophical level excels my capacity, and is probably a digression from the

point that I am trying to make in this paper. However it may be useful to note that “wu” is a merely a name for something indescribable, and this also applies to the notion of Dao.

Dao literally means a path or a way. In *The Book of Tea* (1906), Kakuzo Okakura lucidly explains his Zen influenced understanding of the Dao: “The Taoist¹⁹ conception that immortality lay in the eternal change permeated all their modes of thought. It was the process, not the deed, which was interesting. It was the completing, not the completion, which was really vital” (pp. 22-23).

It is widely accepted that the definition of wu-wei (non-action) is debatable, but the most plausible one is “taking no [deliberate or unnatural] action” (Chan, p. 198, p. 255). It is not no action or no will, but action without intention (human interference), in harmony with the natural order of the Dao. Zhuang-zi’s *wu-wei-wu-bu-wei* (doing nothing, but leaving nothing undone) encapsulates it. The concept is based on the Daoist fundamental belief that “everything is self-sufficient” (Zhu, p. 55). One is equipped with what is necessary for oneself before one knows it. One’s task is to fulfil one’s given nature to its maximum, doing everything possible within that capacity. Rui Zhu credits Zhuang-zi²⁰ for shifting “its focus to that on which a thing’s self-sufficiency depends: the nature of a thing” (p. 55). He explains. “A thing’s nature is perceived in Daoism as a manifestation of Dao in individual things. People can rely on their own nature as much as on Dao itself” (p. 55).

Each thing is born with its own unique nature, which is a limitation and at the same time a source of possibilities. A bird can fly, but a human cannot. Instead, he is given the intelligence to accept his inability to fly, and to invent an airplane. If he did not have that limitation, he would not have thought of inventing an airplane. It is not that he is better or worse than the bird, but only that he has found a way to

¹⁹ Here “Taoist” is another spelling of “Daoist”.

²⁰ One of the philosophical Daoists.

work with his nature, by not taking off from a tall tree as a bird does, but by building a device to fly like a bird.²¹

Zhuang-zi's idea of wu-wei is that of absolute receptivity without any purposeful intention. Zhu explains: "(for) Zhuang-zi, non-action is a way to forget ... the distinction which he draws between himself and the rest of the world by acting on the will of his petty ego – he does not hide from the world, but is united with it" (p. 56). I want to add that forgetting should not be intended, but should be allowed. The intention of trying to forget something requires the knowledge of what that something is, and sets up, in advance, our expectations and predictions of how things should be. By trying to forget the distinction, one sets up the distinction. One forgets oneself simply as a result of doing something else, not by *trying to* forget as an act to accomplish what is lacking, i.e. forgetting.

As Zhu puts it, the "true, original nature is illuminated through his mindless mind and non-active action" (p. 56) in doing (everything possible). This requires one to be at the edge where one's inner self is in contact with the external. Wondering what is available at a given moment in a given place inevitably makes one forget one's conception of oneself separated from the actual doing.

Doing has the double functions of immediate reciprocity at the edge between the self and the non-self. The act of doing results in one's being affected by the very act of doing as well as the thing towards which the doing is directed. One discovers one's nature in being part of the non-self which one affects through one's doing.

However the notion of knowledge is tricky in the Dao. It is said the Dao can be knowable only by doing it. Yet, the doing passes by with its moments and cannot be captured in any concrete terms. Both the thing and the doer are no longer the same as before. And the traces of the change continue to morph in their own separate paths afterwards. Thus the knowledge of the "true, original nature" can

²¹ Pippin's "normative self-assessment" (2005, p. 9) may find its ground in these terms. Normativeness is not in nature itself, but in the principle that one recognises one's own nature. Each person, each society or each history is set in its own nature, and needs to devise its own norms appropriate to that nature. This accords with Pippin's recapitulation of Hegel – "such norms change" (p. 12). But, these norms should be "self-registered" as in his recalling that Kantian claim. (p. 12) Zhu (2002) offers an analogy between Kant's concept of "purposiveness without purpose" and Zhuang-zi's wu-wei-wu-bu-wei (doing nothing, but leaving nothing undone), and I see the validity of such argument. Hegel's ideas are also reflected in the idea of wu-wei.

never be specified in any particular terms, but in constant morphing through doing and being done. Here is Laotzu's opening line in *Tao Te Ching* which may further explain this:

“TAO called TAO is not TAO.

Names can name no lasting name.

Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth.

Naming: the mother of ten thousand things.

Empty of desire, perceive mystery.

Filled with desire, perceive manifestations.

These have the same source, but different names.

Call them both deep–

Deep and again deep:

The gateway to all mystery” (Laotzu, 1959. p. Chapter One)

The Dao does not deny the importance of *naming* and thus desire which that naming calls for. These are part of our human nature, and they let us form what we call society and culture. Different societies and cultures are manifestations of the same nameless order of the universe. However, a name cannot stand alone without its nameless corporeal counterpart.

One cannot learn about the colour red merely by learning the word, but through learning the use of the word and associating the colour that one sees with the word “red”²². The meaning is not in the word, but in the association. As using the word becomes natural, the association becomes automatic and one does not need to think to oneself “it is red”. It simply becomes a habit of mind.

However, each red is different every time, and we do not have words for each different red. So we use the word “red” for all red colours within an acceptable range, and form a shared understanding of that colour. This understanding cannot replace seeing the colour itself. Yet, the habitual thought of “This is red” predetermines the experience of that particular red. The experience is

²² I am thinking about *Remarks on Colour* (1977) by Wittgenstein.

shortchanged as a piece of information (“This is red.”) without actually looking at the colour. The habitual thought cannot be controlled as it occurs automatically. Then the issue is how one can actually look at the colour while the habitual thought occurs.

Thinking is also an experience, as is seeing. As with the trained brush stroke, when one has habits of mind, one can become free from those habits by letting them be and observing them as they occur. One does not need to try to think, but receives the thought in the same way as receiving the experience of seeing the colour red through the eyes. Differing from what Hegel said (Hegel, 1835, Vol. 1, p. 518), I posit that the spirit can become aware of its truth, without “withdrawing from the external”. It can acknowledge itself by being immersed in corporeality, in its habitual reaction to seeing the colour red, for example. The colour red is thought to be red; this thought can occur only by being aware of the seeing of the colour red.

The distinction between oneself and the world will not disappear, as the nameless necessitates the named. One does not need to forget the distinction, but only to let it be forgotten by accepting oneself as well as the world as they are. It becomes no longer an issue. On this point, I differ slightly from Zhu’s “non-action is a mental transformation, a liberation of mind from the confinement of ego and the bondage of things, and, ultimately, an act without a ‘formed mind’ (cheng-xin)” (P. 57). Action without intention is an ideal state of mind. This needs to be said, because the human mind is naturally filled with intention, desire and similar things. The formed mind or ego is also part of the self, if that is the case. Like sadness or love, it simply occurs in the mind. This natural state of the human mind needs to be accepted and acknowledged. Man can be angry because he has the potential to be angry. So when that happens, it needs to be acknowledged and examined if it is appropriate. Denying it is denying one’s nature. Upon acknowledging it, one can work on it by choosing how to react to it, either raging or wondering why one is angry. The basic Daoist belief that there is no right or wrong (p. 56) makes sense this way. Things are let in and out as they “endlessly transform themselves”, as Zhuang-zi says. The world and the self work together by receiving each other, and transform themselves in doing so. This is absolute receptivity.

To wander, as Zhu explains, allows one to cultivate the mind, not the behaviour. The latter will naturally follow the former. Cultivation of the mind requires doing everything one can do according to one's nature – becoming one's nature in the world (Zhu, p. 59). Guo Xiang's interpretation of Zhuangzi is apposite; there is no non-being, but only being (Ziporyn, 2003). In other words, there is only doing, but no desire, intention nor purpose. The latter is the state of non-being. The mind focuses on what is not there.

This state of wu-wei accords with the Hegelian second nature – “the achievement of those habits of mind, sorts of lived embodiment” (p. 291). However, in the case of wu-wei, self-consciousness is not contained by a concept but exists in a practice. Diligent practice and study of one's predecessors is crucial in East Asian scholar painting. When the act accords with the order (one's own nature), it is spontaneous and effortless in its naturalness.

Okakura calls attention to the spontaneity and transiency of the Dao in its practice of constant readjustment. He retells Chinese descriptions of the Dao:

“Chinese historians have always spoken of Taoism as the ‘art of being in the world,’ for it deals with the present—ourselves. It is in us that God meets with Nature, and yesterday parts from to-morrow. The Present is the moving Infinity, the legitimate sphere of the Relative. Relativity seeks Adjustment; Adjustment is Art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings. Taoism accepts the mundane as it is and, unlike the Confucians or the Buddhists, tries to find beauty in our world of woe and worry” (1906, p. 32).

This is why the Dao is difficult to convey in fixed definitions. Absolute relativism and receptivity of the Dao requires adjustment of the self, being in the world. One requires the other for the continual unfolding of each other. Each stroke renews and refines the nature of the painter. The painter finds herself in painting, yet each painting changes the self. Thus, the signification of painting is not intended, but arises from the working of the brush with the ink.

My interest in early modernist painters' formalised figuration is in the fact that they resulted in the same pictorial situation, without the East Asian traditions of Daoism or Zen. It indicates to me something significant about their version of formalised figuration. One common ground that I find between the two groups of

painters is that they were both given the freedom to have full control over their ways of painting. In this state, what arises is something like partially abstracted figures in a personalised style.

I want to draw attention to a historical situation that Damisch does not mention in his discussion of East Asian painting. The East Asian scholar painters had a different social status from that of the early modernist painters. They were of the gentry class, for whom painting was a pastime of intellect and virtue, along with calligraphy and poetry. Unlike professional artisan painters, who were hired to produce realistic renderings, scholar painters of the leisure class were free from such duties, and painted for the purpose of self-discipline and self-cultivation, and simply for the act of painting. For this reason, Japanese engravings by professional artisans, i.e. Ukiyo-e, cannot be understood in the same context. What distinguishes Japan from China and Korea in the pre-modern times is the absence of the "imperial examination", which was employed to replenish the ranks of aristocrats, aristocrats, scholars, and bureaucrats for the ruling class in China and Korea. In Japan, warriors formed the ruling class, and they did not paint. There were some scholar painters, but they did not belong to the ruling class. They were patronised by warriors or merchants, and in that sense, they were not amateurs like the ones in China and Korea.

Such a privileged situation was coupled with a tradition in which the uniqueness of an individual painter was encouraged through the painterly gestures. As Damisch notes, East Asian scholar painting is closely related to the tradition of calligraphy. In general, the scholars were trained in both areas. As in calligraphy, the scholar painting was codified. Certain objects symbolise certain virtues for their characteristics. For example, orchids and bamboo represented moral loftiness, and plum blossoms and stones represented characteristics of principles and justice (Lin, 2006). Among them, landscape is the most highly regarded. As visual likeness of the objects was not important, the painters needed to follow the codified manners of painting them. In this sense, painting is another way of writing. Writing and painting do not conflict with each other, but co-operate in a parallel relationship. Like handwriting, what is painted or written is given; but how it is painted or written is unique to the person. In such a tradition, inquiring

into intention is rather absurd, at least in the sense of the word “intention” in the western tradition of modern art.

Tradition is like the air. We breathe it in, and it becomes part of us. It moulds us in a certain manner, which forms the foundation of our existence as a human community. We do not question why the colour red is red. As we see the colour, we know what it is. If one does not know what it is, one will have to question what it is. What is questioned is not the visible colour itself, but its name (an identifier of currency in tradition) and its description. We make a shared understanding of the colour in order to be part of a particular tradition.

Unlike their East Asian counterparts, early modernist painters pursued their individuality by departing from the tradition of representation. Departing from the tradition, in turn, urged them to pursue their individuality.²³ Tradition is a shared language. Its absence causes unintelligibility of the work. Intention becomes a question when it lies outside tradition.

Change in tradition²⁴ generates a similar circumstance to that of wu-wei (action without intention), but it comes in a different context. For the artist within the tradition of wu-wei, the practice of wu-wei is not questioned as part of the tradition. It is regarded as natural, as it always has been. One does not need to intend it; one just does it.

I believe, however, that the early modernist artist had no other choice but to question what she needed to do and what she was doing, before the new tradition of abstract art settled in²⁵. And this questioning and wondering must have created an environment similar to that of the Daoist action without intention. Wanting to know is an intentional state, yet without the content of what to intend. Without any standards to filter what is coming in, that empty intention takes whatever is available. The problem with early modernist artists though, was not *that* they wanted to know but *what* they wanted to know, and their tolerance for their

²³ This seems to be a chicken-and-egg situation.

²⁴ The human world cannot exist without tradition as part of its natural environment. Often we interpret changes in tradition as an absence of tradition.

²⁵ Why do we use the name “abstract art” for paintings of abstract art, but not for paintings of formalised figuration? When something has a name, it means that it has become part of the tradition which circulates ideas as norms. Naming and establishing a new tradition coincide.

failure to know it. What they wanted to know was something like what Pippin calls the “distinct sort of meaning”.

I want to introduce another German phenomenon: the *Denkbild*. The term is routinely translated into English as “thinking image” or “thought-image”. Gerhard Richter revives this neglected literary genre in his book *Thought-images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life*. In the introduction, he explains “the philosophical miniatures of the *Denkbild* can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production” (2007, p. 2). He further explains:

“For Adorno, a *Denkbild*, which works to say in words what cannot be said in words, launches an impossibility, indeed, wishes to take that very impossibility as its principle. While Wittgenstein famously insists that one must remain silent about that of which one cannot speak, the *Denkbild* seeks to speak only of that about which one cannot speak. The *Denkbild* therefore works to create an image (*Bild*) in words of the ways in which it says what cannot be said. It is a snapshot of the impossibility of its own rhetorical gestures. What it gives us to think (*denken*) is precisely the ways in which it delivers an image (*Bild*) not only of this or that particular content, but always also of its own folding back upon itself, its most successful failure” (2007, p. 13).

While this is most often associated with Walter Benjamin’s aphoristic, figurative writing style, its lineage includes Winckelmann and Herder. Hans Alder explains that Herder’s ideal purpose was “to address the senses and at the same time be clearly and distinctively correct” (2009, p. 342). The theme of wanting to know reoccurs. This becomes more obvious in Benjamin’s term, “dialectical image”. He states:

“To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the

historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process” (1999, p. 475).

In a section on Baudelaire, Benjamin again highlights the link between the standstill of thinking and the appearance of the dialectical image which appears in the interruption of historical process: “Ambiguity is the manifest imaging of the dialectic, the law of dialectic at a standstill. This standstill is utopia, and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image” (1999, p. 10).

I assume this ambiguity is the kind of ambiguity Eco introduces with the openness of open work. If so, the openness of open work is an inevitable one, not an intentional one. Ambiguity is the standstill of thinking after the exhaustion of readymade thoughts in the name of tradition, convention or social norm. Yet there is something that still haunted the modernist artists – the feeling of thinking which has not yet arrived.

This situation forces one to come up with one’s own (real) thinking in that blank space after readymade thinking has been disrupted and exhausted. The lack necessitates its fulfilment. At the blank space of history at the border from one tradition to another, at “its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process”, early modernist artists posed themselves a serious and fundamental question: what is art or what should be art? This question eventually pushed them, as the maker of art, to question the phenomenon of seeing. Unlike the East Asian scholar painters who accepted the unknowability of truth, the modernists tried to solve the problem, thus giving themselves unceasing frustration. This frustration indicates real thinking was taking place. Yet all of these questions should be directed to a more basic question – what allowed the early modernist artists to question their seeing in the first place. In other words, what allows the Denkbild?

I tackle this question in art. Putting aside the German-influenced literature on the subject and its historical baggage, I want to examine the issue through R. G. Collingwood’s (1958) somewhat naive claims that art is an expression of what he calls “emotion” (the emotion of artistic intuition which can be equivalent to the German Denkbild), and emotion is known so far as it is expressed. It is revealed so far as what is visible on the surface of the work. One must express in order to

know what one expresses. Thus, here expression does not mean the dictation of the artist's intention to an audience. Rather, it is the utterance itself. Expression functions as a way to test and ask ourselves what that something is. Without expressing, we are only aware that it is there, but we cannot know what it is, without any visible shapes (p. 152).

Here is what Wittgenstein says about expression:

“601. There is always the danger of wanting to find an expression's meaning by contemplating the expression itself, and the frame of mind in which one uses it, instead of always thinking of the practice. That is why one repeats the expression to oneself so often, because it is as if one must see what one is looking for in the expression and in the feeling it gives one” (1975, p. 79e).

How does the practice engender the expression's meaning? How does an expression give us its feeling? Synonyms may convey different feelings from the same denotation. Let's take the examples of the words “extraordinary” and “abnormal”. We first learn what these two sets of alphabetical characters denote, and then the different nuances their particular contexts convey. Through repetition, the practice allows the public referent to become personal habits, rendering the process automatic and immediate. The meaning instantaneously arrives, as we perform the practice. Acquiring the meaning no longer requires conscious effort, but invisibly lodges in one's feeling as part of automatic routines. It cuts into consciousness only at a moment of a break that interrupts the routine. We respond to that interruption by looking into the feeling that the expression gives. One repeats the expression to oneself until the feeling (the frame of mind while expressing it) becomes visible. Then the question is what triggers or allows “wanting to find an expression's meaning”?

Collingwood offers another level of expression, different from that of the artist, which is distinct from Wittgenstein's argument.

“There is an emotion there before we express it. But as we express it, we confer upon it a different kind of emotional colouring; in one way, therefore, expression creates what it expresses, for exactly this emotion, colouring and all, only exist so far as it is expressed” (1958, p. 152).

He explains that an emotion cannot be felt without being expressed, and that there are no unexpressed emotions (p. 238). He continues that when an artist is affected by initial emotions, these emotions are already expressed to her. Feeling and expressing coincide reciprocally, as with the pair of doing and being done, which I explained earlier in the section of the Dao. In other words, she has already reacted (expressed herself) to the object of the emotions, consciously or unconsciously, and this generates her emotion about it in return. Not everything she sees makes her feel. And the object itself does not cause the emotions nor have meaning. When she feels something towards what she sees or knows, it is because it already means something to her. She reacts to it or is triggered by it according to that meaning – a certain relationship between her and the object. Expressing the emotion is only the unravelling of this relationship.

Merleau-Ponty offers different thoughts on this: “Art ... is a process of expression. Just as the function of words is to name—that is, to grasp the nature of what appears to us in a confused way and to place it before us as a recognizable object” (1993, pp. 67-68). Things appear confusing to the artist only because she tries to see them. She does so because they mean something to her even though that something is not clearly recognisable. If not, she would not have reacted to them; they would have missed her attention, and could not have appeared as confusing to her consciousness. Confusion indicates she has reacted to the object, although perhaps without her deliberate intention. The habitual mind is awakened (or disturbed) by the conscious mind. Intuitive intention enters the scene with the feeling that something has always been there, unnoticed till now; yet what that something is remains intangible. Thereafter, she tries to “become conscious” of that something by expressing it to herself – to be clear about what it is. However, what the artist gains after achieving consciousness of it is another emotion at a higher level (1958, pp. 238-239), a kind of *Denkbild*. Unlike ordinary intuitions, e.g. idioms or identifying a friend from faraway, this emotion does not stand still and reveal its clear shape. The artist's effort is required to refine the initial emotion into another emotion which will then be her own. Therefore, the emotion she gains is not the same as the initial one. Collingwood explains:

“the expression of emotion is not, as it were, a dress made to fit an emotion already existing, but is an activity without which the experience

of that emotion cannot exist. Take away the language, and you take away what is expressed; there is nothing left but crude feeling at the merely psychic level” (1958, p. 244).

Bell differs with Collingwood:

“The artistic problem is the problem of making a match between an emotional experience and a form that has been conceived but not created. ... He [the artist] will need a definite, fully conceived form into which his experience can be made to fit. And this fitting, this matching of his experience with his form, will be his problem” (1922, p. 43).

Bell continues: “[the artist] cannot pour an aesthetic experience straight into another, leaving out the problem. He cannot exude form: he must set himself to create a particular form. Automatic writing will never be poetry, nor automatic scrabbling design. The artist must submit his creative impulse to the conditions of a problem” (1922, p. 47). It is the artist’s responsibility to create “a particular form” from the emotional experience. However, how shall we interpret “a definite, fully conceived form into which his experience can be made to fit”? Bell’s definition of the form, i.e. “a form that has been conceived but not created”, requires consideration. It is a conception of a form, but a form being conceived without its physicality. It seems to defy its definition. It would be more correct to call it a sense of form or an idea of form. Bell’s notion of form cannot be something static and fixed. As Collingwood says, a form only in conception is in the mode of being formed through the artist’s activity of thinking, i.e. expression. Then Bell’s “form that has been conceived but not created” should come before the artist’s expression of that form, as Collingwood describes. Accordingly the artist’s “emotional experience”, in Bell’s terms, can be equated with Collingwood’s initial expression, which prompts the artist’s expression (as thinking) of the form.

Collingwood gives the dimension of experience to emotion; an emotion is not a mere thing, but an experience of certain kind. Making art is an activity to bring the experience of that emotion into existence. The artist creates a form that will recall that emotion, or, to put it differently, a form that has the potential to recall that emotion. So the whole process of making art is to re-experience the initial emotion. Yet, what the artist experiences is not the same as the initial emotion. The initial emotion, as an experience, is not there anymore. It only remains as a

memory. Making it into a form requires interpreting the emotion by recalling it through the form. This recalling gives refinement to “crude feeling at the merely psychic level” which would otherwise be only a hunch in the darkness without any shape.

Collingwood offers that picture of self-consciousness in making art, but he does not go through the psychology of it. The self is contained in a crude, unguarded hunch that is expressed to the artist beyond her control, based on a pre-established set of standards. I consider this to be our first nature as humans. The physical body alone does not make us human, as it only contains the potential of humanness. This potential lets us observe, learn and embody how to become a member of the society that we are born into. All these things are beyond our control, like our accent. The automatic state of first nature is the state in which the artist naturally reacts to – or is activated by – something that matters to her. According to Pippin’s interpretation of Hegel, the modernist artist might have been conscious of this crude hunch and tried to understand it. I am interested in the connection between the embodiment of that consciousness into second nature and the formalised figuration in early modernist painting. I also want to see if this connection applies to East Asian scholar painting.

To know the self is not to discover anything new, but to dig out this crude feeling, which is already there, through expression – an activity of re-experiencing that feeling while making it intelligent. Expression gives physicality to the unintelligible, crude feeling in order to hold it as a manmade object in front of the eyes. Without the language of tradition, the artist must invent her own language from “the merely psychic level” on her own, and expression allows the artist to invent the necessary language. But where does the artist’s personal language come from, and how it can be a language, or be called a language, when it is personal?

Collingwood’s modernist propositions explain Cézanne’s artistic madness, especially his idea of “working from nature”. Regarding classical painters, he comments, “They created pictures; we are attempting a piece of nature” (cited in Merleau-Ponty 1993, p. 62). Then he makes a contradictory remark that “the painter must interpret it.” (cited in Merleau-Ponty 1993, p. 66) Merleau-Ponty

resolves this contradiction: “this interpretation should not be a reflection distinct from the act of seeing” (p. 66).

There is a truism in this. Painting itself is an act of interpreting what the painter sees, whether she intends it or not. As Collingwood says, when the artist feels something, it has already been expressed to her in one way or another. She interprets it through seeing.

As in Pippin’s theory of abstractionism in art, Cézanne inquired into self-reflection. But he did so without leaving nature, despite what Pippin suggests. Cézanne’s treatment of nature conflicts with Pippin’s. The artist’s self-consciousness was not possible without considering nature. And nature includes the artist’s primordial faculty, i.e. seeing, which is the site of self-consciousness. It holds its own logic, as in Cézanne’s “logical vision”, which generated something like formalised figuration. What is this logic, then?

Merleau-Ponty reveals that Cézanne chose not to use outline. Nature does not have outlines, and Cézanne saw this simple truth. This truth could only be gained through his study of seeing, to which neither Merleau-Ponty nor anyone else had access. We do not know the content of his seeing nor of his logical vision, but it enunciates some kind of thinking as part of what Cézanne calls nature. This makes his concept of nature something more than corporeality and the faculties of sense.

Here is Cézanne’s ecstatic pronouncement: “The landscape thinks itself in me, ... and I am its consciousness” (cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 67). Merleau-Ponty calls this “intuitive science” (p. 67). This mode of self-inquiry is expressed in Cézanne’s letters, and is evidenced in his paintings.²⁶

He explains: “I want to make them [art and nature] the same. Art is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting” (cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 63). “I ask the understanding” grabs my attention. I turn to Merleau-Ponty for clarification.

²⁶ Cézanne’s letter to Emile Bernard, May 12, 1904: “I progress very slowly, for nature reveals herself to me in very complex ways; and the progress needed is endless. One must look at the model and feel very exactly; and also express oneself distinctly and with force” (1995. *Letters*. edited by J. Rewald. NY: Da Capo Press, p. 302.).

Merleau-Ponty finds the question of the specific meaning of Cézanne's painting as a challenge to the dichotomies between feeling and thought, chaos and order, and stable things and shifting ways (pp. 63-64). He emphasises that the painter "makes a basic distinction not between 'the senses' and 'the understanding' but rather between the spontaneous organization of the things we perceive and the human organization of ideas and sciences" (p. 64). And, he adds, "Cezanne's painting denies neither science nor tradition. ... The task before him was, first, to forget all he had ever learned from science and, second, *through* these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism" (p. 67). In another narrative about Cézanne, he notes: "He wanted to put intelligence, ideas, sciences, perspective, and tradition back in touch with the world of nature which they were intended to comprehend" (p. 64).

We should recall that even though Merleau-Ponty helps us to grasp the painter's thoughts, which are otherwise unintelligible, his philosophical investigation can only be carried out within language and within his way of adapting that language. For example, here Merleau-Ponty is trying to describe something that does not exist in his language. Thus, what he is doing is trying to transform the unspeakable (i.e. the painter's act of seeing and what is in that seeing) into the speakable (i.e. his philosophical explanations), and the other's lived experience to his imagined narrative, based on his best guess. We hear the same theme repeated, but cannot be sure if this is what he wanted or what Cézanne wanted.



Cézanne. P., 1890-95. *The Card Players (Les Joueurs de Cartes)*. [oil on canvas] (musée d'Orsay, Paris, France)

Merleau-Ponty's analyses of Cézanne culminate in the painter's effort to conjoin interrelated dualities. The artist uses the body as a medium to do so. Nature is ingested and absorbed only to become part of the body. This way, the body becomes intelligent enough to receive nature, and intelligible enough to be received by nature. His nature includes card players, Madame Cézanne, and naked women, as well as table, cloth, mountain, and tree. The painter can see them only because he has the potential to see, and they have the potential to be seen. The painter looks at them as a painter. Probably they look at him in their own ways, which he cannot experience himself.

Ultimately, we are talking about modern human nature, not that of a savage or a mountain. Nature, in this sense, includes not only the world of physical matter but also that of human intelligence. It is the surroundings into which the painter is born. This includes his innate potential as a painter and a human, and the natural and man-made environments which will then fashion that potential. The painter understands and interprets what he sees, as the philosopher Merleau-Ponty might

do, but in his painterly way. His singularity is not in what he thinks in human terms, within tradition, but in his singular body of natural intelligence, formed and carved by the life of the painter and person Cézanne. Practice of painting and personal history work together and bring out the intelligence that was potentially given to him. He sees a painterly meaning arising in what he sees by asking the understanding from his bodily intelligence – the origin of Merleau-Ponty’s “intuitive science”.

I will briefly contemplate this combination of intuition and science. Intuition requires being familiar with a subject through repetitive contact. I differentiate it from an habitual thinking that escapes one’s attention, like linguistic tics.²⁷ Intuition is an immediate, yet conscious response that is presented to one’s awareness. As I see someone or something, a certain immediate thought occurs to me prior to my judgement or belief. I simply detect the thought occurring. In order to turn it into a judgement or belief, I will have to analyse that immediate thought, questioning why I thought what I thought.

This is the opposite of learning a language or counting numbers. For speaking or counting, we apply shared general knowledge to our specific practice until it becomes intuitive. Individual interventions are not allowed, but only social ones. Thus we do not doubt that knowledge. However, for intuitive knowledge, as with artistic judgements or idioms, we analyse it according to our knowledge established through repetitive experiences with the subject in order to form our personal yet general thought about it. This then may turn that knowledge into something objectively intelligible. It does not produce any new knowledge; but it allows us to understand what we have already known by articulating how we know what we know, and thus to share that understanding with others. As Wittgenstein suggests, if someone tells me that she went to the moon but does not know how she got there, I have no reason to believe it (1975, p. 17e, No. 108). If she explains how she went to the moon, I may not take it as a fact, but I can consider the case.

Painting becomes the painter’s analysis of the painterly intuition – “crude feeling at the merely psychic level” (Collingwood, 1958, p. 244) – by articulating it in her

²⁷ One does hear one’s habitual utterances in speaking, e.g. “like” mostly in America, or “To be honest with you” in England.

painterly signs and testing their intelligibility in her seeing. Only when they make sense to the painter, can they be expected to make sense to a possible audience. Painting is then a mode of inquiry for making a reasonable sense – logical vision.

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5. From Formalised Figuration to Geometric Abstraction



As an artist's attention shifted from subjectivity to objectivity, the modernist direction of abstraction took a different turn with the works of geometric abstraction, such as Kandinsky and Mondrian. Their intentions for the change are evident in the titles of their paintings. This change illustrates the problem with Pippin's theory of abstraction in modernist art. This sort of abstract art, which Pippin takes as examples for manifesting self-consciousness, denounced subjectivity, and promoted absolute objectivity in plastic shapes for demonstrating ideological visions. I take Matisse and Kandinsky as examples to illustrate what changes occurred, and the consequences – from Matisse's search for the self through formalised figuration (operated by the artist's intuitive intention) to Kandinsky's utopian dream for objectivity through geometric abstraction (operated by the artist's conscious intention). I want to demonstrate how formalised figuration epitomises the painterly mode of self-consciousness through its so-called primordial method of painting, and how the study of the self

was short lived because of the new scientific, modernised language of painting that we now know as abstract art.

Like Cézanne, Matisse gave up on realistic painting, yet his painting always contains some kind of reference to life, in formalised figuration, which I previously mentioned. This is also evident in his paper cut-outs (*gouaches découpés*), e.g. *La Gerbe* (*Sheaf*, 1953) and *L'Escargot* (*The Snail*, 1953), which are his most abstract works, towards the end of his life. Then, the question is how his search for the self resulted in formalised figuration with identifiable objects.

Even though Matisse's paintings show his progression towards abstraction, he emphasises the importance of an object as an anchor of his painting. He believes: "One starts off with an object. Sensation follows. One doesn't start from a void. Nothing is gratuitous. ... too many of them ["so-called abstract painters"] depart from a void. They are gratuitous, they have no power, no inspiration, no feeling, they defend *non-existent* point of view: they imitate abstraction" (Interview with Verdet, 1952 cited in Flam 1995, p. 217). This belief is exemplified in figurative references to the material world in all his paintings. He says, "the final image is an equivalence of some *thing*, however abstract or metaphorical its treatment" (Flam, 1995, p. 210).

However that some thing must go through "the feeling of the artist" (Flam, 1978, p. 117). The artwork becomes his "pictorial means" of seizing "current truths"²⁸ of life which take on "new meaning for him" (1995, p. 42). The legacy of Cézanne's unrelenting passion for logical vision continues in Matisse. Matisse echoes Cézanne: "I cannot copy nature in a servile way; I am forced to interpret nature and submit it to the spirit of the picture" (1995, p. 40). "To paint an autumn landscape I will not try to remember what colors suit this season, I will be inspired only by the sensation that the season arouses in me" (1995, p. 38). Yet, the process of interpretation is not at his command. Both in Cézanne's "logical vision" and in Matisse's "condensation of sensations" (1995, p. 38), there is a sense of waiting – waiting for the meaning to appear.

²⁸ Originally cited in *La décoration* (Havard, H., 1892. 2nd ed., Paris, p. 7).

Matisse's theme of condensation of sensations resonates with Cézanne's saying "I ask the understanding" (cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 63). It is the state after "a long process of reflection and amalgamation" (1995, p. 54). He explains:

"Suppose I want to paint a woman's body: ... I will condense the meaning of this body by seeking its essential lines. The charm will be less apparent at first glance, but it must eventually emerge from the new image which will have a broader meaning, one more fully human" (1978, p. 36).

Much of Matisse's thought here corresponds with that of Collingwood:

"But the thought of a painter must not be considered as separate from his pictorial means, for the thought is worth no more than its expression by the means, which must be more complete (and by complete I do not mean complicated) the deeper is his thought. I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have about life and my way of translating it" (1978, pp. 35-36).

Condensation of sensations is equivalent to the process of refining the "crude feeling at the merely psychic level" (Collingwood, 1958, p. 244) into an intelligible object of thought. Matisse explains the crude feeling:

"Feeling is self-contained. You don't say to yourself [sic]: Look, today I am going to manufacture some feeling. No, it is a matter of something more authentic, more profound. Feeling is an enemy only when one doesn't know how to express it. And it is necessary to express it entirely. If you don't attempt to go to the limit, you only get approximations. An artist is an explorer. He should begin by seeking himself, seeing himself act; then, not restraining himself, and above all, not being easily satisfied" (1978, p. 104).

Feeling simply occurs. It is always given. The process of condensation transmutes the initial hunch of crude feeling into an identifiable form which the artist can say to herself. Being able to say it to herself gives the feeling of knowing it.

In later years, Matisse delivered a more developed and articulate account: "The painter releases his emotion by painting; but not without his conception having passed through a certain analytical state. The analysis happens within the painter. When the synthesis is immediate, it is schematic, without density, and the expression suffers" (1978, p. 58). His "density" corresponds to "condensation" or

“fermentation”, which may refer to what Matisse means by “a certain analytical state” (1978, p. 58). He prohibits solely physical emotion (using the example of Velázquez) without sensory pleasure. I ask how these two are different. He speaks of “a deeper feeling which touches the mind as well as the senses.” On the other hand, he warns, purely intellectual painting would remain “locked up in the intention of the painter” without ever being realised (1978, p. 59). He adds, “I think only of rendering my emotion. ... the difficulty for an artist is that he doesn’t realize the quality of his emotion and that his reason leads this emotion astray. He should use his reason only for control” (1978, p. 60).

Sensory stimuli at the mechanical level do not carry values by themselves. The body simply reacts to the objects of the stimuli. We assign our habitual and reactive values to the stimuli, i.e. physical emotion as Matisse would call it. I regard Matisse’s “deeper feeling” as something elevated from these instantaneous reactions of personal values. It is an object of thinking gained after being refined and condensed by the eyes of contemplation and the hands of expression.

Intelligibility of expression requires a language - a system of signs. Yet the painterly language is a secret one, existing only between the artist and the viewer. It has to be intelligible, and the viewer has to be willing to learn it. Just like any language, it is conceptual and physical. It requires the eyes to follow the formation of the surface in a certain manner of intentional gestures which then elicits meaning, or the feeling of meaning. It is solely experiential and tacit. Only those who have been there may appreciate it. For others, it is a mere artistic madness in its absolutely subjective activity.

The contradiction between the absolute truth of painting and his subjective emotions was Matisse’s self-inflicted problem, and he pursued a solution by seeking for the “complete significance” (1978, p. 38) that was available to both his audience and himself. As with most modernist artists, Matisse’s ultimate purpose of painting was to communicate. At the end of “Notes of a Painter”, he says, “Whether we like it or not, however insistently we call ourselves exiles, between our period and ourselves an indissoluble bond is established” (1995, p. 43). The person Matisse overlaps considerably with the painter Matisse, and his life and

his artwork are intertwined. The artist's intention can only be formed by her connection with others, and the intention of art reflects the intention of the time.

Hegel's treatment of art as a historical social object makes sense this way. Pippin explains, "Hegel denies the autonomy of the aesthetic" (2008, p. 395). In this denial, Hegel claims that "art must be considered as a social institution linked to the development of the norms and values of the society as a whole" (2008, pp. 395-396). Any interpersonal transaction, including art, aims at "the development of the norms and values of the society as a whole" by default. However, art does it in its unique manner. It speaks in silence, and this silence gives autonomy to each individual's judgements, or at least gives the feeling of it. It is communicable only to those who are willing to listen to the non-verifiable silence and to question their judgement without letting it settle. Silence gives freedom to the viewer for deciding how to judge and being responsible for her judgement (by questioning it). And this freedom stands within the direction towards which the work points. So the task for the artist is to create a work which can speak in silence.

I regard Matisse's practice of *flatness* as his way to solve this contradiction in the coexistence of speaking and silence. With his flatness he emphasises the impartial and neutral relationship in balance – the relationships, between himself and his subject, and between various pictorial elements within the frame of the canvas – *rapport* as he calls it. These relationships are *flat*, without any dominance in his composition, so that all parts of the picture take equal importance in balance and harmony. Matisse saw in the arabesque patterns "impassioned impulse" (1978, p. 142). His interest in decorative patterns originated in the flatness and evenness that these patterns form in the frame, as shown in *Large Composition with Masks* (1953). His objects are intended to be just surfaces, not representations of something. "The picture is formed by the combination of surfaces, differently coloured, which results in the creation of an 'expression'" (Matisse, 1978, p. 72).

Matisse's flatness is related to his "decorative manner" (1978, p. 36) for painting. Decorativeness was his practical method of departing from the tradition of representation, and also his moral base in the sense of being honest with his feelings. Here is how he thought of his decorativeness: "A picture should, for me, always be decorative. While working I never try to think, only to feel" (1978, p.

51)²⁹ This hints at his avoidance of rational thinking, in favour of sensate analysis in feeling.



Flam (1978, p. 20) notes Matisse's interest in decorative art at as early an age as 23, through an evening course at the *École des Arts Décoratifs*. He presents Matisse's statement to support his speculation that Matisse may have been interested in Henry Havard's discussions in *La décoration*. Flam cites Havard:

“while artists can depict violent movement, decorators should avoid it, that while painters can depict sadness, horror, disgust, and pain, decorative artists should not: ‘The duty of the decorator ... is not to provoke sentiments of fear or enthusiasm, but simply to adorn, and embellish. He should interest the spectator, but never move him.’³⁰ The decorative artist, Havard goes on to say, ... should be careful not to create an illusion, not to imitate nature too closely” (1978, p. 21).

Here is the part of Matisse's “Notes of a Painter” that Flam quotes:

“What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity-and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject-matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue” (1978, p. 38).

Matisse's metaphor of “a good armchair” (for which he was derided then) sums up the decorativeness for Havard and for Matisse himself. Decorativeness is

²⁹ An interview with Degand (1945).

³⁰ An interview with Verdet (1952).

meant to serve not to preach. It is for the moment of pensiveness, not for moving the viewer in a certain direction. He clarifies that “[t]he decorative for a work of art is an extremely precious thing”, but it is not “to say that the paintings of an artist are decorative” (1978, p. 105)³¹ Decorativeness is only a method for – not the function of – painting.

Matisse further explains this pensiveness in connection with vagueness:

“Both harmony and dissonance of colour can produce agreeable effects. ... if I were satisfied with this [fresh and superficial sensations during the first session], now that I think I can see further, my picture would have a vagueness in it: ... I want to reach that state of condensation of sensations which make a painting ... I prefer to rework it so that later I recognize it as representative of my state of mind” (1978, p. 36).

Matisse may have adapted some principles of decorative art, but it would not be a mistake to think that what he pursued was “a truer, more essential character, which the artist will seize so that he may give to reality a more lasting interpretation” (1978, p. 37). What I am interested in is this “lasting interpretation” in vagueness.

For art’s new function, i.e. interpretation, Matisse often mentions the word “rapport” which he explains as “the affinity between things, the common language” of love (1978, p. 147).³² Matisse’s rapport requires quietness, stripped of the “human element”, “the faculty that certain things have to identify with their setting” (1978, p. 105). This quietness summarises abstraction in modernist painting – absence of figures, avoidance of illusion, and vagueness/ambiguity. But there is more to Matisse’s vagueness.

This may be further explained with Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* and Picasso’s painting *Guernica*. Freddie Rokem (2010) compares Benjamin’s Denkbild-style text with *Guernica*. He explains that Picasso’s painting depicts the human suffering and debris that is specific to the bombing of Guernica while Benjamin’s text directs us to the universal image of history. He says “Picasso has made us the

³¹ This statement can be interpreted in different ways, but I regard it as his motivation for the calmness of his painting.

³² Cited in *Matisse*, by Schneider (p. 251).

direct witnesses of this particular catastrophe, whereas Benjamin asks us to transform the already known chain of events into a universal, 'abstract' catastrophe: history itself" (p. 174). My interest is in the quality of Klee's *Angelus Novus* which let Benjamin produce that text of universality. What is visible in Klee's *Angelus Novus* is the angel alone, with nothing like the figures in Picasso's *Guernica*. What Benjamin describes is what he saw through the eyes of the angel in his imagination. Rokem informs us that Benjamin privately owned the painting for twenty years, so we can assume he had more than enough time to contemplate the painting and produce such a meditative text. But Klee's painting must have had that quality of meditation in itself. What is the quality of the painting that allowed Benjamin to let his eyes become those of the angel?

Relating this to Matisse, I search for the same kind of quietness that I find in Klee's painting – quietness caused by what is lacking in the painting. There is no debris, are no animals nor suffering humans, unlike Picasso's *Guernica*. Yet the lack registers because of what is already there (the angel, in Klee's painting), as it does with ambiguity. What is there guides the viewer to what is not there. What is not there is only seen when the viewer acquires the eyes of what is there and forgets her own eyes. Then the issue is what or how much of it needs to be seen in order to show what is not seen. Eco's suggestion of the degree of openness is relevant. Here is Matisse's solution.

Matisse says: "When you have a real feeling for nature, you can create signs which are equivalent to both the artist and the spectator" ("The Path of Colour" 1947, cited in 1978, p. 116). To understand what that "real feeling for nature" is, one will have to be in that very space which let Cézanne say: "The landscape thinks itself in me, ... and I am its consciousness" (cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 67). It is the space in which one leaves behind the human elements of personal identity, taste, preference, likes, etc., and becomes what one sees by simply being there and receiving it *fully*. The artist's sign for a tree is possible only after she identifies herself with the tree. Then she can expect that her audience may have some responses. The artist and the viewer meet in the thing, whether it is the artwork or the tree, leaving behind their individual personal baggage, at least for a moment, trying to become the eyes of the other.

Pierre Schneider, in *Matisse* (p. 10), discusses Matisse's role in establishing a new task for art, no longer to "isolate itself ... in an artificial and neutral space, ... but to 'participate in our life'" (Matisse, 1978, p. 106) by being useful, not by being beautiful. The way Matisse wanted to be useful was by providing calmness, as he states: "I don't wish to disturb".³³

Calmness in his painting is related to his "almost religious awe towards life" and "the deep gravity which persists in every human being" (1978, p. 38). Making art is the artist's way to connect with the viewer, and to share what he has found in himself in the same historical change. The painting presents his personal reaction to shared circumstance.

I relate this to the moral aspect of intention in art. An intention in art involves a power relationship between the artist's imposition of the intention and the viewer's acceptance of it. The artist tests her own morality through the way she deals with this intention. Eco's concept of open work is valuable for this reason. The individual person of the artist cannot be muted in making art. Making art is her way of practising her moral values – not by persuading the viewer, but by allowing the freedom of seeing.

Labrusse³⁴ refreshes our sense of Matisse's ethical concerns in searching for the rapport that connects all humans and organises the colours in his painting. Matisse's concept of rapport functions as an artistic principle for gaining a balanced composition in a painting, and simultaneously as his moral theme of life.

His appreciation of pagan art and cave drawings, besides their benefits to his painterly problems, are related to his moral themes of honesty and sincerity. "In pagan art, the artist is frank with himself, carnal, natural; his emotion is sincere. There is no ambiguity", he says.³⁵ In an essay of 1953, he mentions that an artist has to look at life as he did as a child (1978, pp. 148-149). This was one of the

³³ An interview with Verdet in 1952 (1978, p. 146).

³⁴ An interview with Degand in 1945.

³⁵ I refresh the fact that Kandinsky was influenced by the claims of Theosophy and Symbolism.

popular mottos among the modernist artists, returning to the original, without distortion by what Matisse called “human elements”³⁶ (1978, p. 105).

Maurice Denis’s criticism of Matisse’s “agnostic” (Denis, p. 14) subjectivity hints at the bipolar tension within modernist art:

“... it [Matisse’s work] is something even more abstract; painting relative to nothing but itself, pure painting, the pure act of painting. ... This is none other than the quest for the absolute. And yet, a strange contradiction, the absolute is compromised by the presence of what is the most relative force in the world: the individual’s emotions” (Denis, p. 62).

Denis criticised Matisse for his relative and individualistic work on the grounds that it could not approach the absolute because of its absence of representational figures (Long, p. 48). Yet, this mysterious statement of Denis sums up the essence of Matisse’s painting or his intention for painting – a quest for the absolute through the most relative means, that are his personal emotions. Each individual is a unique manifestation of the same thing – the world we all belong to. We can discover our unique manifestations by looking into how we have lived through the world according to our individual nature. This worked in a tradition like the one of East Asian scholars; however, it was an alien concept to the modernist artists.

Denis’s censure of Matisse, for not presenting objective and universal values, demonstrates the modernist anxiety, and prefigures what would take over the art scene. What was still tangible and real, even though unintelligible, became invisible, utopian and ideal.

Kandinsky, like other modernist painters, progressed from formalised figuration before adapting geometric shapes into his painting. However, his motivation for formalised figuration was different from Matisse’s. Even though the anti-naturalistic style of abstract art seemed proper for the artist’s anti-materialistic and spiritual mission³⁷, Kandinsky feared that this type of work lacked intelligibility for communicating their messages. The use of hidden imagery was his choice to overcome this problem. As Rose-Carol Washton Long (1980) notes,

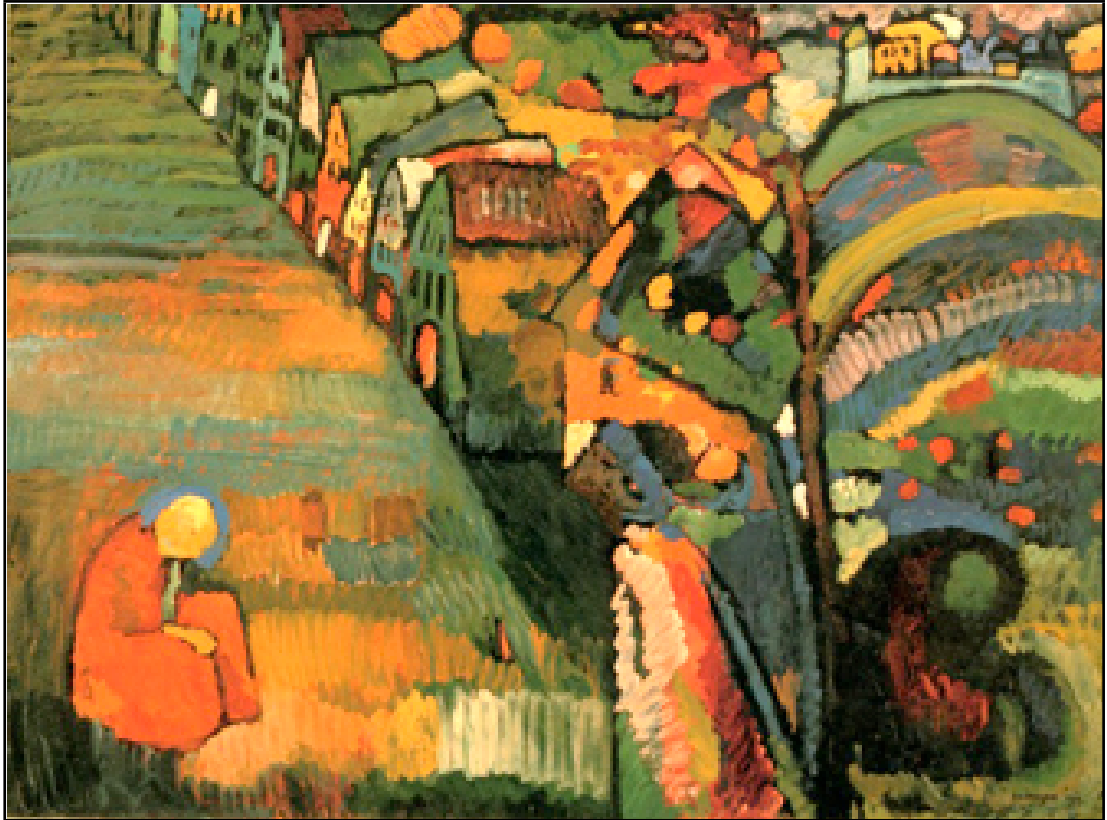
³⁶ Long tells us that Kandinsky’s interest in hidden imagery was influenced by the claims of Theosophy and Symbolism that “the truths of the higher world could best be conveyed by indirect and vague means” (p.42).

³⁷ (Kandinsky, 1912, pp. 24-25)

Kandinsky's abstract art is the outcome of "a gradual process of obscuring imagery" (p. 4) through experimentation with various methods of painting.

Even in 1911, Kandinsky had not yet started to eliminate imagery completely from his painting, according to Long. He still felt the need for the image, but "the image need not 'be reproduced with precision'" (p. 6). Long narrates Kandinsky believed that "hidden images would lead the spectator to take part in a mystic ritual" (p. 66), and the spectator would eventually understand the spiritual messages, by deciphering mysterious, ambiguous images. Imprecision of image (which led to formalised figuration) was a middle step towards a greater level of abstraction (Long, p. 6). Kandinsky anticipated that "when both the public and the artist were more familiar with abstraction, the artist could rely more heavily on forms derived from his imagination" (Long, pp. 10-11).

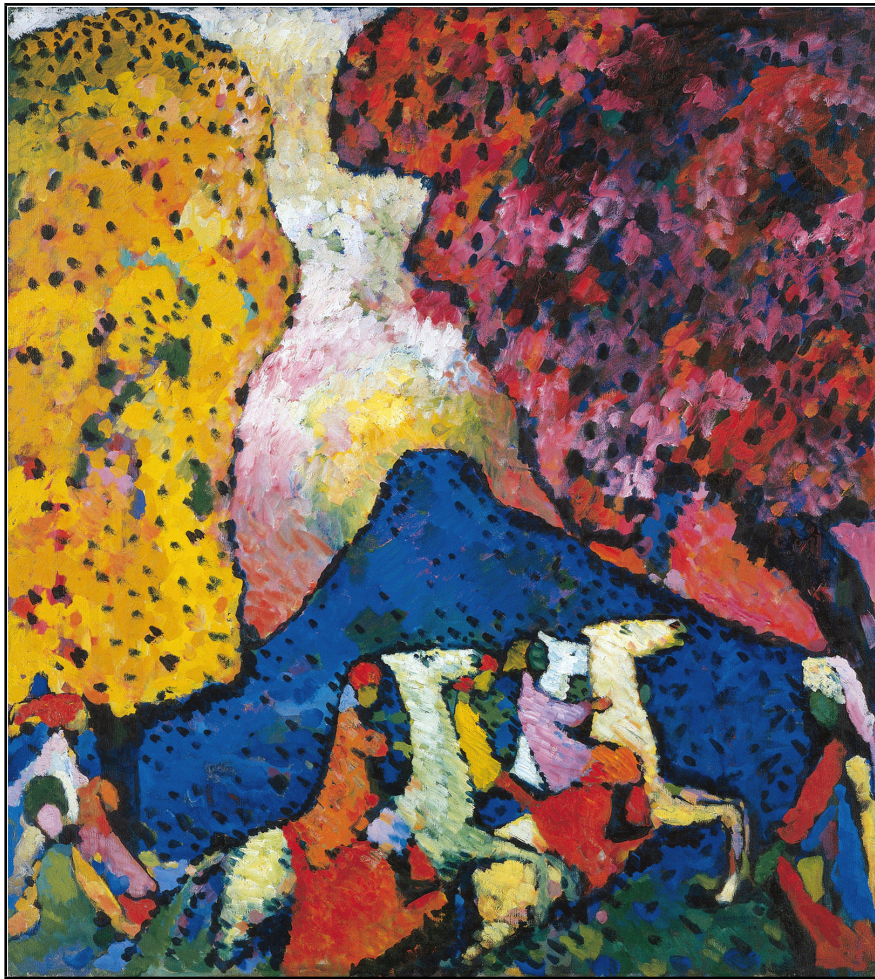
By late 1910, Kandinsky made a noticeable development towards his characteristic abstract art, departing from the method of hidden imagery (Long, p. 72). We can compare his paintings, e.g. *Painting with Houses*, *Picture with Archer* and *Blue Mountain*, made in 1909, and the series of *Improvisation* in 1910. The titles indicate the move towards his so called pure abstract art. Also his own style in the *Improvisation* series was more mature. Each of the three paintings of hidden imagery show different brush strokes. *Picture with Archer* is in Cézanne-like brush strokes, and *Blue Mountain* uses more punctuate strokes. Apparently, Kandinsky was struggling to find his own style of painting, adapting methods of other painters. His works *Lyrical* and *Impression 5 (Park)* in the same year as the *Improvisation* series but a bit earlier, give us a glimpse of the transition. They still carry vague traces of images, i.e. a horse in *Lyrical*, and mountains and trees in *Impression 5 (Park)*. But the brush strokes show a hint of the painterly style that we know now. The *Improvisation* series also shows the gradual disappearance of images as well as the solidification of his style over two years. The *Improvisation* series and the *Composition* series show this procedural progress. In this strategic implementation of abstraction, the imagery of his paintings gradually became more and more diffused. Hidden imagery was a preparatory step to the abstraction of his later work. This proves the illogic of Eco's intentional openness.



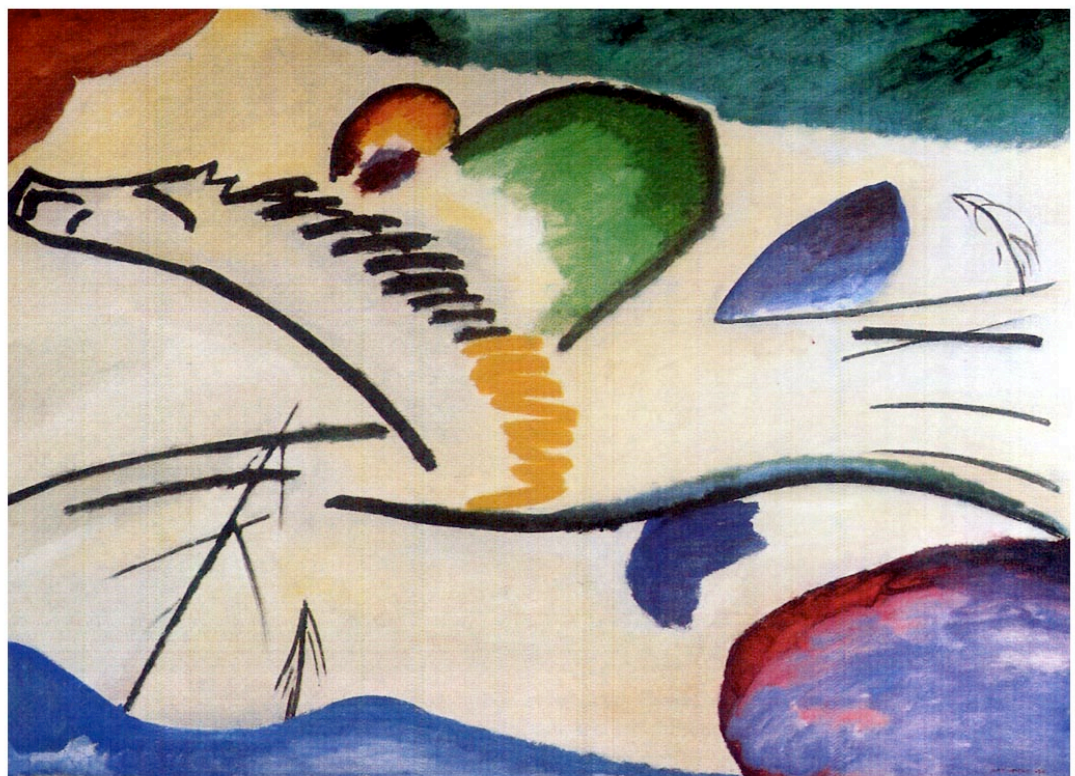
Kandinsky. W., 1909. *Painting with Houses*.



Kandinsky. W., 1909. *Picture with Archer*.



Kandinsky. W.,
1909. *Blue
Mountain.*



Kandinsky. W., 1910. *Lyrical.*



Kandinsky. W., 1910. *Improvisation 5 (Park)*.

This puts his painting of formalised figuration in a different context from that of Cézanne or Matisse. It was more of a strategic choice for Kandinsky, an alternative to Naturalism and Impressionism, to realise the concept of abstraction in pursuit of his theoretical agenda³⁸. Matisse also rejected exact copying, like many other modernist painters, but it was the natural result of his experiment with decorativeness and flatness in painting rather than his deliberate intention.

Kandinsky's methodical pursuit of abstract art is again illustrated through his experimentation with stage composition and poetry writing. Influenced by the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total art work), he expected that the synthesis of

³⁸ Originally from Kandinsky's "Über Bühnenkomposition", in: *Der Blaue Reiter*, eds. by W. Kandinsky and F. Marc, first published in Munich, 1912; reprinted documentary ed. by K. Lankheit in Munich, 1965, p. 193.

multiple stimuli could affect audiences with its evocative power (Long, p. 52). This idea of synthesising a work, using various art forms, accords with his belief in the psychological phenomenon of synaesthesia.³⁹ Long notes Kandinsky's certainty about his method. "Not only did Kandinsky believe that fairly exact equivalents could be found for individual musical notes within the colour scale, for example, he also believed that once a system of identifying these equivalents was developed one could combine or even contrast equivalents to intensify reactions" (Long, p. 54).⁴⁰ His employing of musical elements in his painting exemplifies this idea of total art work.⁴¹

By the time of Kandinsky, the science of vision was already well established, including Goethe's *Theory of Colours* published in 1810, as Jonathan Crary⁴² explains in "Modernizing Vision". Also, L. D. Ettlinger hypothesises that "Kandinsky had heard of the basic tenets of Gestalt psychology (1961, p. 9). He adds that Kandinsky turned to the psychology of perception to solve his major problem with expressing the spiritual messages in material form. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* shows Kandinsky's own formulation of colour theories in a mix of theosophy and psychological studies of perception. As much as Kandinsky tried to be scientific and rational, the enterprise in which Kandinsky was engaged does not seem as straightforward as science. Crary explains that, through modern science, "the transcendent is mapped into the empirical" (p. 36). In a climate of intensity and exhilaration, new technology started to quantitatively map the body according to its "physical and anatomical structure and functioning" (p. 36). Kandinsky epitomises the modern attraction to scientific modes of explanation. As Ettlinger notes (p. 13), Kandinsky was searching for the threshold of the sensorial stimulus that would give the emotional impact. Ettlinger points out pseudo-scientific methods in Kandinsky's approach to painting. Kandinsky carried out procedural experimentation inspired by pre-established theories, e.g. Gestalt psychology, which subsequently yielded an extensive collection of texts

³⁹ (Kandinsky, 1914, pp. 19-20)

⁴⁰ Crary refers to Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1971, New York: Pantheon Books. pp. 318-320).

⁴¹ Originally cited in "The Role and Modalities of Colour" (1945).

⁴² Originally cited in "The Path of Colour" (1947).

about principles of composition and painting. His adaptation of music into his painting is another example.

All these experiments suggest that for Kandinsky, painting, as the visible matter of art, was his means to achieve his goal – delivering spiritual messages. Such effort is evident in his treatises *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*, and *Point and Line to Plane*, which are the results of his theoretical research with various tools of abstraction, mental and sensorial. Kandinsky states his view on the form of art in *On the Question of Form* (1912).

“Form is always temporal, i.e., relative, since it is nothing more than the means necessary today, the means by which the revelation of today sounds forth, manifests itself. ... Thus one should not make an idol out of form. And one should not battle over form any longer than it can serve as means of expression for this inner sound. One should not, therefore, seeks one’s salvation in any one form” (1982, p. 237).

All different art forms are equally valid, that is, an artist is free to use any art form, because form is not an issue of importance, but a means to an end. “[F]orm is merely the expression of content” (1982, p. 237).

Kandinsky’s method is application, whereas that of Matisse is interpretation. Let’s take the example of applying music to painting. Like Kandinsky, Matisse was musically trained in violin till he was fifty (Flam, 1995, p. 161). However, his application of music to painting is unlike Kandinsky’s. To him, painting and music are parallel without being conflated (Flam, 1995, p. 160). This contrasts with Kandinsky’s employment of music in painting. Kandinsky was aware that each art form had its own “peculiar force”, and these peculiar forces are used as means (Long, p. 52).

Music and painting have different natures, and require different treatments accordingly. Music is a time-based art, and its sound causes the listener’s body to physically vibrate. The experience over a certain duration is what counts, and it does not rely on concept or meaning as such. It is transient, intimate, and physical; thus it is a powerful tool for manipulating the listener’s emotions, and probably that is what interested Kandinsky most. In comparison, painting requires contemplation from a distance; thus it can create meaning. The seeing is

still an experience, yet in a timeless space of contemplation. The two media can influence each other, but then one has to be transformed and assimilated to the other.

Matisse tried to translate or “moderate” (in Matisse’s terms), simplicity of musical apparatus, i.e. seven notes, into plastic art (1978, p. 99).⁴³ Music was for him a synonym of simplicity in his metaphorical approach. His paintings are simplified in his painterly signs, but they do not have the abstractness of musicality so evident in Kandinsky’s. He talks about colours in seven notes. “I use the simplest colours. I don’t transform them myself, it is the relationships which take charge of them. It is only a matter of enhancing the differences, of revealing them. Nothing prevents composition with a few colours, like music which is built on only seven notes” (Flam, 1978, p. 116).⁴⁴ His emphasis on relationship is consistent here.

Matisse is warning against the artist’s intellectual knowledge of her own intention. At the same time, he is suggesting “a certain analytical state”. This state of analysis can only be tacit – fully alert yet unspoken. It is a form of analysis, yet unique to the medium, e.g. listening, for music; seeing, for painting. We look for certain structures and patterns whose expression is unique to that particular medium. Kandinsky does not describe this alternative state of knowing “the inner working of colour and form”, and left it under the responsibility of the unconscious (1912, pp. 46-47).

At the beginning, an artist arranges to receive a “superficial impression” (1914, p. 23) of physical sensations, Kandinsky says. Then, she arranges the three elements of this temporary impression, which are colour, form, and itself (in the combination of the first two). Her choice of objects in arranging the elements “must be decided only by a corresponding vibration in the human soul” (1914, p. 32). The *inner need* is possible, only when the artist experiences “the inner appeal of form (whether material or abstract)” (1914, p. 33) through this vibration. The

⁴³ Originally cited in “On the Question of Form” (1912).

⁴⁴ I note that Schopenhauer introduces mystical consciousness, which he differentiates from the ordinary consciousness of an individual. This mystical consciousness is inscrutable, without “the will to live”, at a level of universality, lacking even the fundamental forms of object and subject. His mystical consciousness fits Kandinsky’s mystical notion of inner soul, yet it is more likely that Kandinsky adds Schopenhauer’s idea to his own formulation, rather than being entirely subject to it.

inner need consists of, again, three elements: something in herself as a creator (personality), the spirit of the time as a child of her age (style), and the cause of art as a servant of art (pure artistry). The first two elements are necessary in order to realise the third (1914, pp. 33-34). In parallel with Kandinsky's formula of form and content, the objective cannot reconcile with the subjective, which is a departure from Matisse. The subjective will be overcome and the objective will take the higher position. "[T]he abstract spirit first takes over a single human spirit; later it rules an ever-increasing proportion of mankind" (1982, p. 238).⁴⁵ Until then, a theory cannot lead the practice, but follows it, because "the inner desire for expression" (1914, p. 35) cannot be determined. The artist must seek it himself, listening to the *inner sound* within himself. His terms "inner need" and "the inner desire for expression" must refer to what Matisse calls feeling or emotion .

This correlation between "inner need" and "emotion" might help explain why Kandinsky had a more favourable view of Matisse than Denis, Prichard, and the other critics. Kandinsky admired and was influenced by Matisse's Fauvist works for their abstract (non-naturalistic) quality. In opposition to Denis's view on Matisse, Kandinsky regarded Matisse's pure act of painting as an indication that he "endeavours to reproduce the divine" (1914, p. 18), solely through the original means of painting: colour and form. The problems that he had with Matisse were the conventional beauty in the paintings, and Matisse's individualistic attitude towards art. Kandinsky regarded that, for Matisse, the individual self in the material realm was the destination, not the means to reach the absolute. But in his universal objective schema of abstract art, this was not permitted. The subjective must serve the objective.

Regarding this dualistic dilemma of the object and the subject, Kandinsky proposes a surprising insight which challenges our conventional understanding. In contrast to the usual association between the objective and the subjective, he explains that, "the subjective element is the definite and external expression of the inner, objective element" (1914, p. 34). The distinctive, subjective variations of each individual are external temporary expressions of the absolute objective, guided by the calls of the inner need, the absolute object inside each individual.

⁴⁵ Originally cited in *On the Question of Form* (1912).

Kandinsky defines the inner need as the impulse of “[t]he inevitable desire for outward expression of the *objective* element” (1914, p. 34). This objective element is inner and eternal. It is the absolute spiritual value of “the kingdom of the abstract” (1914, p. 32). Artists, guided by the objective “inner impulse, must find suitable outward expression”. Therefore, art throughout ages has the same objective appeal. If we regard the subjective as an individual’s personal taste or choice, e.g. a choice for breakfast, or of a car, and the objective as something that occurs to her beyond her control, e.g. hunger or sorrow, then Kandinsky’s ideas of the subjective and objective sound reasonable.

This corresponds with Matisse’s approach, but they differ in their treatment of the subjectivity of the artist. While Matisse found the objective in the artist’s subjective feelings, Kandinsky’s objective is an ideal object separate from and superior to the artist’s subjective particularities. Thus Kandinsky took the path to basic pictorial geometric shapes that he believed would stir absolute objective inner calls in the audience when the individual’s subjective variations were overcome and stripped out.

Kandinsky’s absolute inner need sounds quite like Hegel’s idea of Absolute Spirit. It is as though Kandinsky was aware of the departure from the *first nature*. He says, “The revolt from dependence on nature is only just beginning. Any realisation of the inner working of colour and form is so far unconscious. ... The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul, so that he can test colours for themselves and not only by external impressions. ... Nowadays we are still bound to external nature and must find our means of expression in her” (1912, pp. 46-47). Kandinsky urges separation from nature. He regards external nature as an inevitable obstacle that needs to be controlled and overcome. He states “[t]he forms, movement, and colours which we can borrow from nature must produce no outward effect nor be associated with external objects. The more obvious is the separation from nature, the more likely is the inner meaning to be pure and unhampered” (1910, p. 50).

The statement above easily evokes the assumption that Kandinsky read some Hegel. This is probable, since Steiner lectured on Theosophy but also on Goethe and Hegel; and Kandinsky was greatly affected by Steiner (Golding, p. 15). But,

Golding records that Kandinsky immersed himself in Schopenhauer and Goethe. Possibly, this was because of the kinship between Kandinsky and Schönberg, who was influenced by the philosophy of Schopenhauer. This makes it even more puzzling to determine the origins of the philosophical ground of Kandinsky's art theories. Schopenhauer opposed the traditional German Idealists, which included Hegel, and his notion of will evaded the principle of self-consciousness and rational will. His conception of the will was rather like a mindless, non-rational urge at the level of our foundational instincts.

It is not well recorded how much Kandinsky was influenced philosophically by Schopenhauer⁴⁶, but I suppose that Schopenhauer's theory of music must have appealed to Kandinsky. Schopenhauer maintains that music is the most metaphysical art, above all other art forms, and develops a theory in which music achieves transcendent states of mind by embodying the abstract forms of feelings, abstracted from their particular everyday circumstances. It is not tied to particular feelings in an individual or in a contingent phenomenon, but it draws the quintessence of emotions as the thing-in-itself, i.e. sadness itself or joy itself. In this detached or disinterested way, music allows us to apprehend the nature of the world without being involved in the suffering of daily life. However I will disprove this absolute quality of music with the example of John Cage in the later part of the paper. What Kandinsky and Schopenhauer believed to be the absoluteness of music is only possible within the particularity of their conventions.

Despite his fervent effort towards a universal visual language, Kandinsky's strategic method seems to have awkwardly failed by ignoring the human intention to speak that language. Ettlinger refers to Kandinsky's search for the means to make a new artistic idiom, as "an incongruous and uncomfortable mixture of cold calculating theory and a mystic sense of some grand spiritual mission" (1961, p. 6). There is a strange gap between Kandinsky's theories of the artistic form of non-representation and the mystic sense of his spiritual message. He leaps between a mystical conception of spiritual elevation and an ideal plastic means of non-figurative geometric shapes. These two do not exist in the human world.

⁴⁶ From "Art and Artist" in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1914, p. 54).

All this explains why the sense of self is lacking in Kandinsky's theory of art. His inner need is an absolute entity, independent of the artist's living self. In contrast to Matisse, Kandinsky's individual self does not exist *in principle*. For him, personal emotions are simply artistic elements that serve his spiritual purpose and then vanish. He does not give any consideration to the subjective self, and there is no discussion of the subjective conditions of the artist in his art theories. His sense of self, if any, is anonymous and bound to the spiritual world to come.

Contradicting Pippin's expectations, Kandinsky seems to betray Pippin's theory of abstract art in relation to Hegelian self-consciousness. Kandinsky's method of abstract art seems far from art's self-consciousness, that is, art trying to know itself; but it becomes a means to an end. The end is some kind of mystic spiritual mission, which is quite far from what Pippin proposed with rational apprehension of the self. Furthermore, the problem of form was not Kandinsky's main concern for his painting. "The question of form does not in principle exist" (1982, p. 248).⁴⁷ This is not to deny the question of form. The question of form does exist, but solely in practice, as a means. He acknowledges that an artist is allowed to make use of any art forms, if she expresses her "inner emotions and experiences", according to her "inner truth". However, "in every case the inner sound will be independent of the external significance" (1982, p. 250). Form and content cannot coexist. Form needs to be relinquished for content to be alive; "dead matter is living spirit" (1982, p. 250).

For Matisse, form is not merely the expression of content, but is the content. The painter's differences are clear in their conceptions and treatments of the content of art: *Have something to say*⁴⁸ for Kandinsky, and *What do I want?*⁴⁹ for Matisse. For the former, the form is a carrier of the content, and for the latter, the content speaks of the form. Matisse's issues regarding form could only be resolved within painting. Painting was his way of seeking an answer to what he wanted to express.

⁴⁷ From "Observations on Painting" in 1945 (1978, p. 102).

⁴⁸ These words sound so important to the activity of extracting meaning from the painter's seeing, yet there are no other words to expand them. This is simply because we are still within the tradition and culture which do not accept such things.

⁴⁹ By "historical", Bürger means the specific avant-garde who came out in reaction against modernist art.

For Kandinsky, his theory of abstract art derived from the presupposition that the absolute can only be expressed in an abstract form.

Geometric abstract painting, like Kandinsky's, speaks of a language of shapes such as point, line and plane, which do not exist in reality. It simply exists as a language of signs without any other functions or uses except to carry the dogmatic messages of geometric shapes, which are not available to those who do not know the language. Language of art becomes exclusive, and requires a decipherer, i.e. Kandinsky. Art in such a manner is accompanied by a utopian doctrine.

It is the same for Mondrian and others involved in the de Stijl movement. John Berger explains the principle of the group:

“The individual must lose and re-find himself in the universal. Art, they believed, had become the preliminary model by means of which man could discover how to control and order his whole environment. When that control was established, art might even disappear. Their vision was consciously social, iconoclastic, and aesthetically revolutionary” (1980, p. 119).

As with Kandinsky, geometric shapes, such as straight line, angle, cross, point, rectangular planes, the primary colours (red, blue and yellow), and white background and black lines, are the fundamental elements of the painterly language for de Stijl. Art is only a means to achieve the universal. As Berger notes (1980, p. 124) what these abstract artists shared was that in the name of objective, they withdrew their subjectivity from reality, and replaced it with – or used it for – the objectivity of “invisible universal principle”.

Kandinsky's theories of art make some kind of scientific formulae out of opposite values of plastic relations, under the hierarchical command of the absolute *inner sound* or *inner truth*. For example, “keen colours are well suited by sharp forms (e.g. a yellow triangle), and soft, deep colours by round forms (e.g. a blue circle)” (1914, p. 34). Or, “an unsuitable combination of form and colour” has “fresh possibilities of harmony” (1914, p. 29). All of his theories are based on presuppositions concerning certain symbolic meanings, corresponding to his religious beliefs, to psychological effects, and even to psychic effects, in order to cause what he calls “vibrations in the soul” (1914, p. 25). As with de Stijl, what he

calls the absolute *inner sound* or *inner truth* remains as a utopian, dogmatic assertion which cannot be verified or argued, and thus becomes absolute. Scientific objectivity then reaches absolute universality, separating itself from – and disregarding – the artist’s subjectivity.

The language is different in the case of Cézanne or Matisse. Their languages of painting refer back to life. Art, after all, is an act of communication, and it is about life, to which we all belong in our own ways. And art speaks about life in perceptual language through sensorial stimuli in the present.

Immediate sensations are organised and condensed into signs that are equally available to both the artist and the spectator. The horizon of cultural meaning that was inscribed in reality as a natural setting appears in the sight of attention and inquiry. Unlike Kandinsky’s use of geometric shapes, which seems like an artificial attempt to push the possibility of abstraction far beyond the boundary of our reality, Cézanne and Matisse subjected themselves to a reality in which, as part of our human nature, seeing spontaneously becomes understanding.

Their modernist delirium of nature, feeling, emotion, and the self seems arcane, overly dramatic or too passionate. However, it would be unfair to make comments from a contemporary point of view a century later. Their frankness and naivety at the beginning of modern era have been supplanted by the absolutism of geometric shapes. Condemnation of subjective feeling from the so-called abstract artists, i.e. Kandinsky or Mondrian, then presaged the time of science and progress to whose blind objectiveness our individual thinking and living conform.

Berger says about de Stijl:

“What is missing is an awareness of the importance of subjective experience as a historical factor. Instead, subjectivity is simultaneously indulged in and denied. ... Artists, however, reveal more about themselves than most politicians: and often know more about themselves. This is why their testimony is historically so valuable” (1980, p. 125).

It is often the case that artists mis-communicate or sound unintelligible. What is involved in painting or making art does not have verbal identifiers, besides some generic words like “some thing”, “emotion”, “feeling” or “intuition”. Yet, once in a while they yield threads that explain commonalities we all share but are not

aware of. Cézanne's "logical vision" is one, and Matisse's "condensation of sensations" (1995, p. 38) is another.⁵⁰

These short key terms may not mean much to us. However, their similarity indicates the painters' shared concerns at the beginning of our modern time. Only by putting aside our contemporary outlook, can we be able to put their words in the contexts of these painters. They sought after the basic elements of human perception and emotional interpretation in order to understand the world in change, without any pre-established direction, between two eras marked by official names in history. This historical fissure allowed and forced them to see and paint the world on their own terms without being dictated by social normality. The Denkbild could only be conceived in that state of disorientation.

As much as Cézanne, Matisse was concerned with how to explain these personal feelings he had throughout his career as a painter. He tried to analyse his psychology in his own terms. He did so through his solitary process of painting. Matisse's contribution to the field of art also lies in this. He was an ordinary bourgeois artist who pursued strict bourgeois work habits. His artistic aim was no more than "a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue" (1978, p. 38). His subjects are mostly items in a domestic environment, e.g. window, wallpaper, woman, table, violin, chair, goldfish and snail. He never tried to be more than what he was – a painter. He was not on the frontier of modernist art like Cézanne, a self-confident genius like Picasso, nor an idealistic, intellectual and spiritual messenger like Kandinsky. He was a "materialist, secular, pragmatic" (Bock-Weiss, 2009, p. 168) ordinary, modernist individual who decided to devote his life to art. His anxiety and timidity was in line with that of other ordinary people, i.e. every mental worker, the businessman as well as the man of letters (1978, p. 38), immersed in the same drastic and violent changes of history. As one of them, he found his little niche in himself as an ordinary individual who was allowed to contemplate and understand himself on his own, without dictation from authorities. Without any big ambition, he simply wanted to know his activity of painting. As a sincere disciple of Cézanne, he followed the simple truth of

⁵⁰ The original version is explained in http://www.toutfait.com/unmaking_the_museum/Standard%20Stoppages.html.

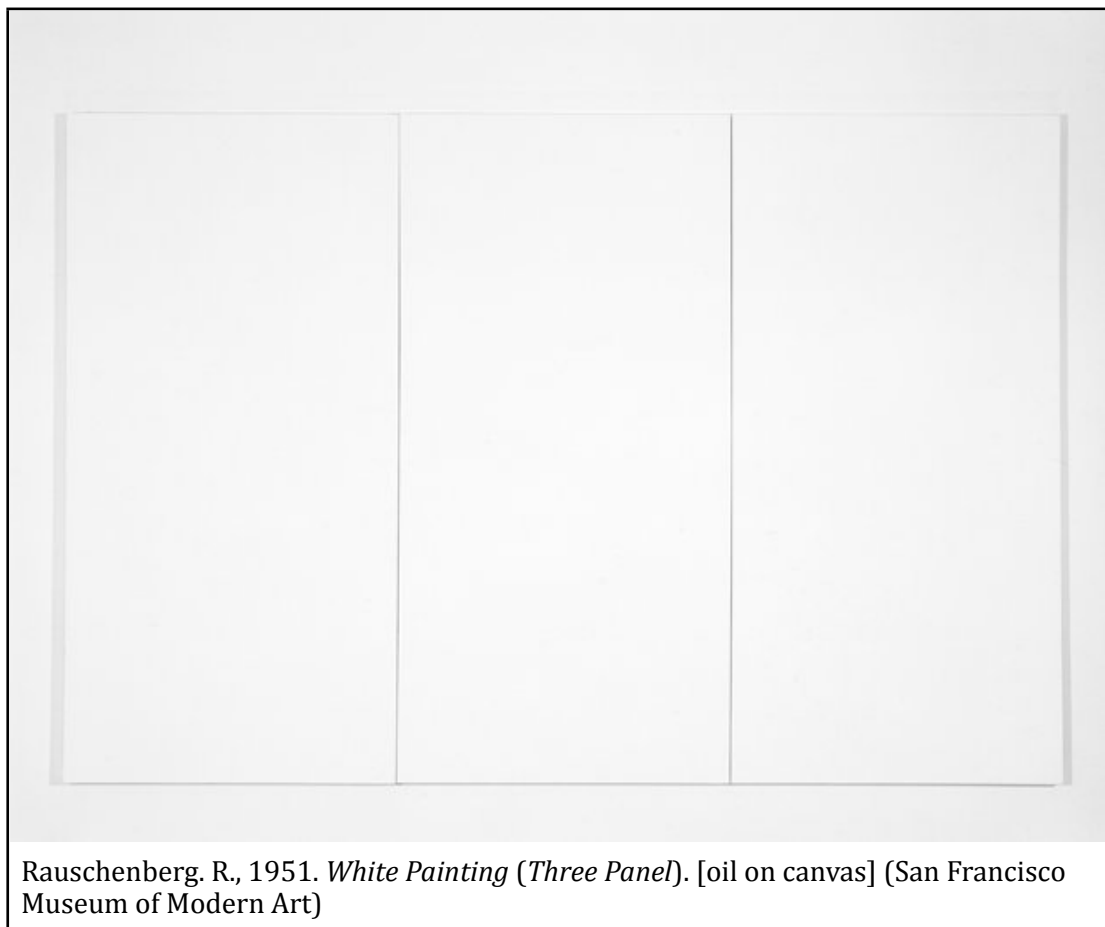
Cézanne: “We see things; we agree about them; we are anchored in them; and it is with ‘nature’ as our base that we construct our sciences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 64).

An artist is trained to go to the extreme (bottom) of our human limits, beyond the virtual world of human society standing on traditions, conventions, laws, rules and regulations. Scientists and philosophers may call this extreme limit the unconscious or intuition. The unconscious or intuition are just words which do not explain anything beyond saying that we don’t know about that part of ourselves. That is where the true picture of the self remains, beyond the guarding of regulatory consciousness, which is bound to precepts of society. It is the shared plane of society which has been lived through the individual’s personal history, and submerged into the nature of the self.

We may ask how the creation of the field of psychology occurred in conjunction with Hegel's suggestion of self-consciousness as a crucial destination in human history. Along these lines, we may ask why artists started to and were allowed to explain their art practices and thoughts about their works. Matisse saw the alarming arrival of the new world geared with the machine and modern technology, and the values of order, reasoning and precision. His language could not help but take what was available at that time. We hear him speak about what was pressing and what was coming, e.g. “analysis”, “synthesis” or “reason”. Or “[c]omposition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter’s command to express his feelings” (1978, p. 36). These words recall Collingwood. The world was changing, and Matisse tried to cope with those changes in his own way. In the absence of tradition, which everybody lives and breathes in together, he chose the most dangerous and controversial route to reunite with the world – his single self, which was his most absolute and at the same time fragile source of life. But the battle was lost, as we see in the subsequent history of art.

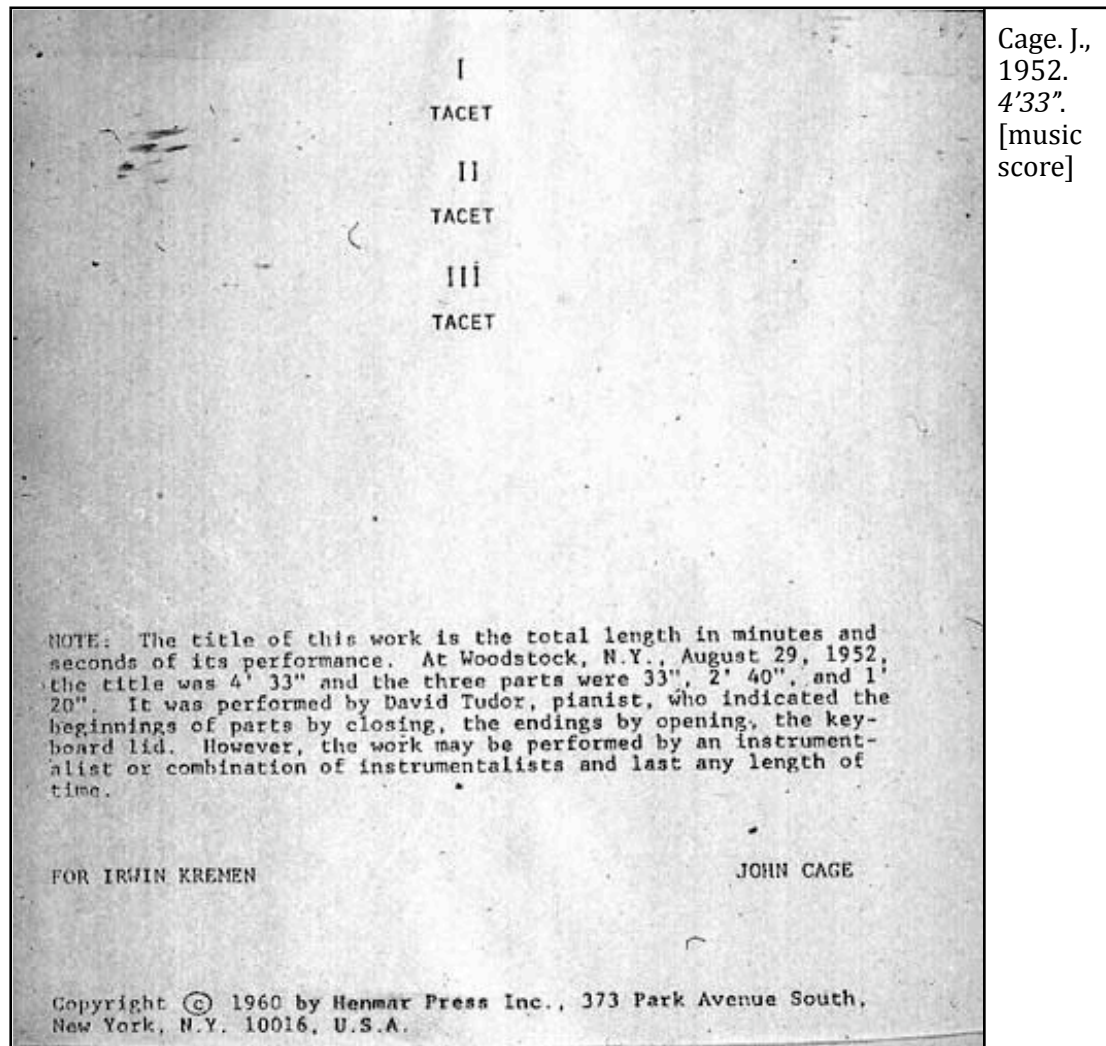
6. Leaving Tradition and Rejection of Intention

Towards the end of modernism, the cultural lead shifted towards denouncement of intention in creative works, i.e. music, theatre, visual art, literature and so on. The avant-gardists, in opposition to their modernist predecessors, denounced the artist's authorship of control by, for example, using chance operation. At its extreme, artistic decisions were left to the contingency of rolling dice (John Cage) or dropping pieces of string (Marcel Duchamp). The extreme case came with the abolition of art itself in the anti-art movement.



This evidences the lurking paradox of Eco's intentional openness, which he anticipates with his advice on the degree of openness. Too little openness is exemplified by classical and medieval art, and too much openness by later works of modernist art, such as John Cage's *4'33"* and Robert Rauschenberg's flat white paintings, for which the artists intentionally denounced any intention. In Eco's scenario, open work of the modernist avant-garde resulted from the transition from the univocality of pre-modern art to the plurivocality of modern art. However, the example of Cage shows that art has gone back to univocality of anti-

art, i.e. his notion of nothing. So, what Eco sees as open work occurred during an in-between state from one univocality to another. Yet the latter differs from the former in its method. The former is done in a rather straightforward way: meaning is in what is seen. The latter takes a twist: it denies its meaning through the claim of self-negation, and then reinforces the same denial as a consequence of the paradox of the claim. The paradox highlights intention in its self-reference.



For a better picture of this, I identify two phases of abstraction in modernist art: abstraction of figurativeness, (early modernist art) and abstraction of the artist's intention (the anti-art of later modernist art), which Pippin and Eco do not mention. Peter Bürger and Susan Sontag identify the boundary between these phases as a break which changed the course of modernist art.

Bürger (1974) distinguishes the (historical)⁵¹ avant-garde of anti-art from (aesthetic) modernism with respect to their social roles. Modernism intended to alter the methods of art, against tradition, within the pre-established frame of art. It subsequently resulted in affirming its social status as an institution only by means of a change in the representational system. In contrast, the avant-garde attacked such self-affirmation of art as an institution, along with its practice of institutionalised commerce, and propagated their idea of sublating art into life (pp. 60-63). And, their strategy was to abolish art as a whole by putting art itself in question.

In her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967), Susan Sontag reviews these different paradigms of artistic creation in the modern era. One of them applies to Matisse: "an expression of human consciousness, consciousness seeking to know itself" in "the 'absoluteness' of the artist's activity" (p. 182). Kandinsky represents an alternative version of this: "a struggle was held to exist between the 'spiritual' integrity of the creative impulses and the distracting 'materiality' of ordinary life". The later part of the myth is that art, upon evolving from within consciousness itself, became an "antidote" to consciousness. This declaration of "self-estrangement", in contrast with the self-affirmation of art in the first myth, was what led to "anti-art" as a matter of course – "the abolition of art itself" (p. 182); because real silence is only possible outside art.

As generally known, this attitude of anti-art was widely shared with its gesture of defending the freedom of the audience against the artist's authorial influence. Eco's open work is one of the main proposals in this stream, along with Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy", which proposes the reading of authorial intention as a fallacy, and Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967), in which he announces the extermination of authorial intention. Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" and "The Aesthetics of Silence" summarise the thematic claims of anti-art: desire for silence against meaning of language. She says interpretation, "the revenge of the intellect upon art" (p. 7), is a way to "[tame] the work of art" into something "manageable, conformable" (p. 8); and she asserts

⁵¹ As in his other pieces, Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages* contains an ironic joke. Without understanding it, the work cannot be explained. Please read the actual mode of manufacture of the work along with Duchamp's claim in: http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_1/News/stoppages.html.

that sensual experience of the work of art against (critics') interpretation. I regard Cage as the spokesperson of anti-art in the arts, and I pay particular attention to Barthes as his counterpart in the field of language. Barthes, who is known as a semiotician, is paradoxically in defiance of the constraints of language, and often seeks refuge in art. His idea of *the Neutral* is consonant with Cage's *Nothing*.

Their proposals of nothing and the neutral create an ironic paradox in their realisation because of the discrepancy between what they say and what they do. If I am not the one who is speaking, then who is saying I am myself? Self-negation cannot constitute itself in practice. Denying oneself is only possible in one's gesture only to point to oneself. In order to deny oneself, one has to have others recognise that self as the self who is saying, "This is not me". Thus self-negation must be communicated. But by doing so, one contradicts what one says. Despite its claim of non-art, anti-art still presents itself as a work of art. By asserting that it is not what-it-is, it firmly solidifies its self-governing position. Self-negation holds innate self-contradiction. What anti-art negated was not art itself, but the definition of art; this brings confusion to its definition, and thus breakdown of communication.

In *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1958), Stanley Cavell says that a work like Cage's violates the categorical definition of art, challenging "if we are clear what a painting is, what a piece of music is" (p. 219). This is because Cage presents something as a work of art which is supposed to carry "the intentions and consequences of art" (p. 219). That something violates the categorical definition of art, yet still claims to be art.

This is the paradox of art of anti-art. "Anti-art" is merely a figurative expression without the intention to realise it. Its intention is heard loud and clear. It claims to be non-art, but presents itself as art. Here we see the discrepancy between what the artist *says* and what she *does*, let alone what the artwork does. This confusion is epitomised in Cage's quote, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it".

The meaning in art was no longer available to be interpreted and consumed. In this sense, anti-art placed the socio-political dimension of avant-garde art on a different level from the modernist's, by refuting the exchange of meaning between the viewer and the artist. By contrast, modernists exercised their control over

their works, directing the viewer's attention to the material. The obscured content of art forced the viewer to do more work than was the case with pre-modernist art, in order to decode the intention hidden underneath the visible surface filled with trees, flowers, vases, the sky and nude bodies.

This confusion is Cavell's problem with the art of modernism, more precisely with the stream of anti-art. It is not a matter of bad or good art. Since the work is not even regarded as art or non-art, criticism is inappropriate. He says "what the modern puts in question is not merely, so to speak, itself, but its tradition as a whole" (p. 222). It is not that "the tradition is broken", but that the modernist work such as Pop Art or Cage's music (now called post-modern), is "irrelevant" to the tradition (p. 206). To be more precise, what troubles Cavell is that it is not just some individual works like Cage's, but the whole art world which is testing the definition of art. He asks the modernist artist "to find what it is his art finally depends upon" – the criteria that make us accept the piece as a work of art. Only then can the audience work on discovering what it is and why she so accepts it, in the "continuity" of the medium itself, e.g. painting or music (p. 219). He challenges Beardsley and Wimsatt's "The Intentional Fallacy". Here is a quote from the article that Cavell cited.

"One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem" (1954 cited in Cavell, 1958, p. 226).

Cavell problematises this part "the critic must go outside the poem". He argues that the artist's intention should be discovered inside, not outside, the work.

The quote should mean something different, if he had not omitted that "the poet's aim must be judged at the moment of the creative act, that is to say, by the art of the poem itself" (Wimsatt, 1954, p. 4). Beardsley and Wimsatt suggest that a work is made in a certain way, influenced by the artist's intention. However, it is judged by whether or not it works for the audience. The work belongs to the public, not to the author nor to the critic. "It is embodied in language", "an object of public

knowledge" (1954, p. 5). While Cavell emphasises the audience's right to demand the artist's intention, Beardsley and Wimsatt ask both artist and audience to meet in the middle ground of the artwork within the shared sphere of public knowledge.

Cavell demands organisation of a work that tells us why an artwork is it is, "how it means what it does" (p. 228). His propositions are based on his belief that works of art are meant to be understood (pp. 227-228) in a certain manner. The artist's intention must be discovered for the ways the physical elements of the work are organised, and that organisation is set in the tradition of the medium. Cavell's strong demand for intention has to do with the way he thinks of receiving artworks. He reads them as pieces of knowledge. He accept them "as data for his philosophical investigation" (2002, p. 227).

Cavell and Beardsley and Wimsatt locate the intention of art in the same place – inside the work. But they differ in what they search for. Whereas Cavell demands a single intention that is validated and accepted by all who belong to the tradition of the medium, Beardsley and Wimsatt leave the artistic intention up to the audience's discovery of interpretation in the work. Within tradition, Cavell says, what is offered is "the real thing" (p. 220), and this discovery is unnecessary. In the absence of tradition, the acceptance of modernist art, which carries the possibility of "fraudulence" (p. 220), i.e. anti-art, necessitates that "[t]he medium is to be discovered, or invented out of itself" (p. 221).

Cage shares the same principle with Beardsley and Wimsatt: the work belongs to the public. Yet, his scale of the public is much larger, with no exclusion. Cage's theory of music underlines this. Like Cavell, many of Cage's fellow musicians "claimed that music is not made of sound, but rather of the relationships of the sounds, and that in order to appreciate it we must understand its structure" (2000, p. 15). He proposed that "music is made of sound". He continues "[e]very one with ears may hear it. ... music need not to be understood, but rather it must be heard" (2000, p. 17).

How do the two statements differ?: "music is made of sound" and "music is made of the relationships of the sounds". The former directs at the medium of sound which is available to anyone with ears, and the latter at the language of music

which is available only to the ones with the privileged access to the language. Cage's favour of sound, over the relationships of sounds, shows his stance against the elitism of music. He adds: "Knowledge often becomes a prejudice. ... The prejudiced ear is listening not to the sounds, but to the relationships of the sounds" (2000, p. 18). For him noises "had not been in-tellectualized [sic]", and he fought against tonality in favour of noises (1973, pp. 116-117). He needed "a clean slate" for his atonal music, so used "non-musical" instruments. He "tapped tables, books, chairs, and so forth" (2000, p. 31). Cavell deems the practice, like Cage's, to be fraudulent. The artist did not deliver what he expected, a piece of work with "sincerity", "seriousness", "genuineness" and "intention".

Silence is not permitted within art. As Sontag puts it, Cage's *4'33* is only a literal usage of silence for art, not silence of art. Cage still put on a performance, *speaking*, even if his audience couldn't hear it. Art always speaks, even if it speaks of silence, and it wants to be heard. It speaks through itself as an object made with certain intentions and choices, not through the words of the artist. If not, we should not call it a work. "Nothing" is a name for Cage's exploration of non-intention. In the same way that silence was not possible in art, Cage knew it was impossible to lack an intention. Chance operation was his solution for the impossible task of non-intention.

Prior to Cage, Marcel Duchamp had already adopted chance operation. In *3 Standard Stoppages*⁵² he prepared a protocol for constructing the work. It is believed that "he had dropped three pieces of string, each exactly one meter long, each from a height of exactly one meter, and each only once, onto a canvas. He then glued each string to the canvas in the exact position of its chance fall" (Shearer and Gould). Even though it is debatable whether or not Duchamp

⁵² Chance operation is often confused with aleatoric music. Indeterminacy in music is represented by three main tendencies: Chance music, Aleatoric music, and Stochastic music. These three categories are distinguished by the level at which the indeterminacy happens. The indeterminacy of chance music happens during the composition. Once a work is composed, the score is followed exactly the same way as all traditional music scores. In contrast, in aleatoric music, indeterminacy happens at the level of performance. The performer is asked to make certain decisions for the piece during the performance. Stochastic music involves indeterminacy at the level of composition, but uses strict mathematical tools (stochastic distributions). Random plays a role in this process, but it does not apply to the whole process of composition. A short overview of the differences is in: <http://ems.music.uiuc.edu/courses/tipei/M104/Notes/cage1.html>

actually followed the protocol, what matters to us is that the work was initiated by the rules that he set.⁵³

Duchamp, however, did not establish a method of chance as such. The chance event in making *3 Standard Stoppages* was rather an accidental encounter which allowed him to move to a new dimension in making art. As Calvin Tomkins notes, Duchamp valued *3 Standard Stoppages* not for its artistic quality but for being his steppingstone to break out of the past. Cage puts it this way:

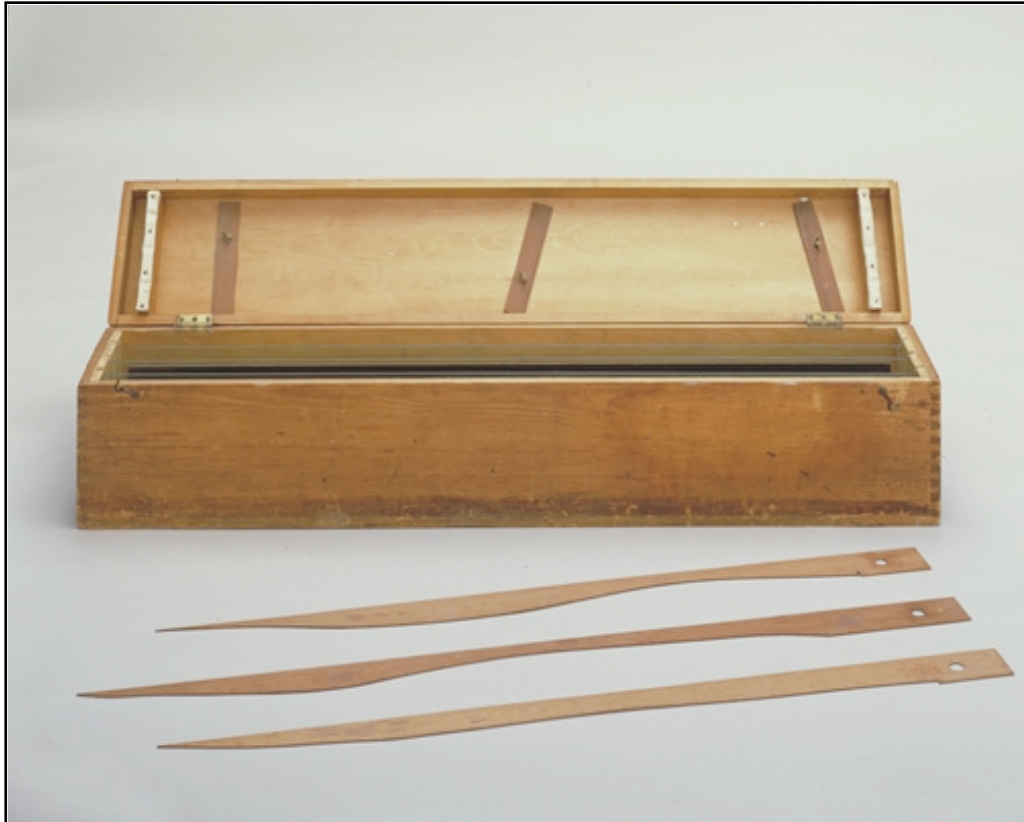
"but for me it opened the way -- the way to escape from those traditional methods of expression long associated with art. I didn't realize at the time what I had stumbled on. When you tap something, you don't always recognize the sound. That's apt to come later. For me the *Three Standard Stoppages* was a first gesture liberating me from the past" (Shearer and Gould).

<p><u>The Idea of the Fabrication</u></p> <p>horizontal</p> <p>-- If a thread one meter long falls straight</p> <p>from a height of one meter on to a horizontal plane</p> <p>twisting <u>as it pleases</u> and creates</p> <p>a new image of the unit of length --</p> <p>-- 3 examples obtained more or less similar conditions</p> <p>: <u>considered in their relation to one another</u></p> <p>they are an <u>approximate reconstitution</u> of the unit of length</p> <p>The <u>3 standard stoppages</u> are the meter diminished</p>	<p>Duchamp, M., 1913-14. Note for <i>3 Standard Stoppages</i> (<i>3 Stoppages Étalon</i>). (Source: Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal, by permission)</p> <p>From the Box of 1914 at The Art Institute of Chicago; in Arturo Schwarz' Duchamp Catalogue Raisonné (Revised edition, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 1997). This picture is my version of "Note 96."</p>
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⁵³ A one minute clip from *Imaginary Landscape No. IV* is available at <http://www.mindatplay.co.uk/imaginarylandscape.html>.



Duchamp. M., 1913-14. *3 Standard Stoppages (3 Stoppages Étalon)*. [1 wooden box, 3 wood slats, 3 canvas strips with string] (Original - The Museum of Modern Art, Paris)



Duchamp. M., 1913-14. *3 Standard Stoppages (3 Stoppages Étalon)*. [3 wood slats, 3 canvas strips with string]

<p>Orchestra</p> <p>1. Victor frequency record 84522 B at 33 1/3 R.P.M. ^{100 cycles} Victor frequency record 84522 B at 78 R.P.M. ^{100 cycles} Victor Constant Note Record No 24 (84519 B) at 33 1/3 R.P.M. ^{84 cycles} Victor Constant Note Record No 24 (84519 B) at 78 R.P.M. ^{84 cycles}</p> <p>2. Victor frequency Record 84522 A ^{84 cycles}</p> <p>3. Large Chinese Cymbal</p> <p>4. String quartet $\text{♩} = +b =$ mute strings with palm of hand ^{to be played very weakly without accents except where indicated} Sweet bass strings with gong water</p> <p>This composition is written to be performed in a radio studio. 2 microphones are required. One microphone picks up the performance of players 1 + 2. The other that of players 3 and 4. The relative dynamics are controlled by an assistant in the control room. The performance may then be broadcast and/or recorded.</p>	<p>Cage, J., 1951. <i>Imaginary Landscape No. 4</i>. (A sample page with his instructions)</p>
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3 *Standard Stoppages* was made in 1913-14. His “the past” must have meant the kind of modernist art tradition to which Matisse and Kandinsky belonged: formal composition, narrative structure and individual inspiration in an easel painting. It also indicates the past of the artist’s pre-determined intention.

While Duchamp was somewhat relaxed about his use of chance, Cage was famous for his meticulous preparation of chance operation.⁵⁴ It was far from being a random process. Chance occurs within the boundaries set by his choices, and these choices result in different consequences. It is well known that Cage carefully prepared his work. It was definitely not nothing. Chance operation follows basic

⁵⁴ My translation.

rules or guidelines. This tempers and skews the process of chance, while keeping a certain degree of unpredictability. An artist can use these rules as a way of controlling the degree of chance in her artwork. The relationship between probability and unpredictability is set by the rules, and the degree of chance is defined by this relationship.

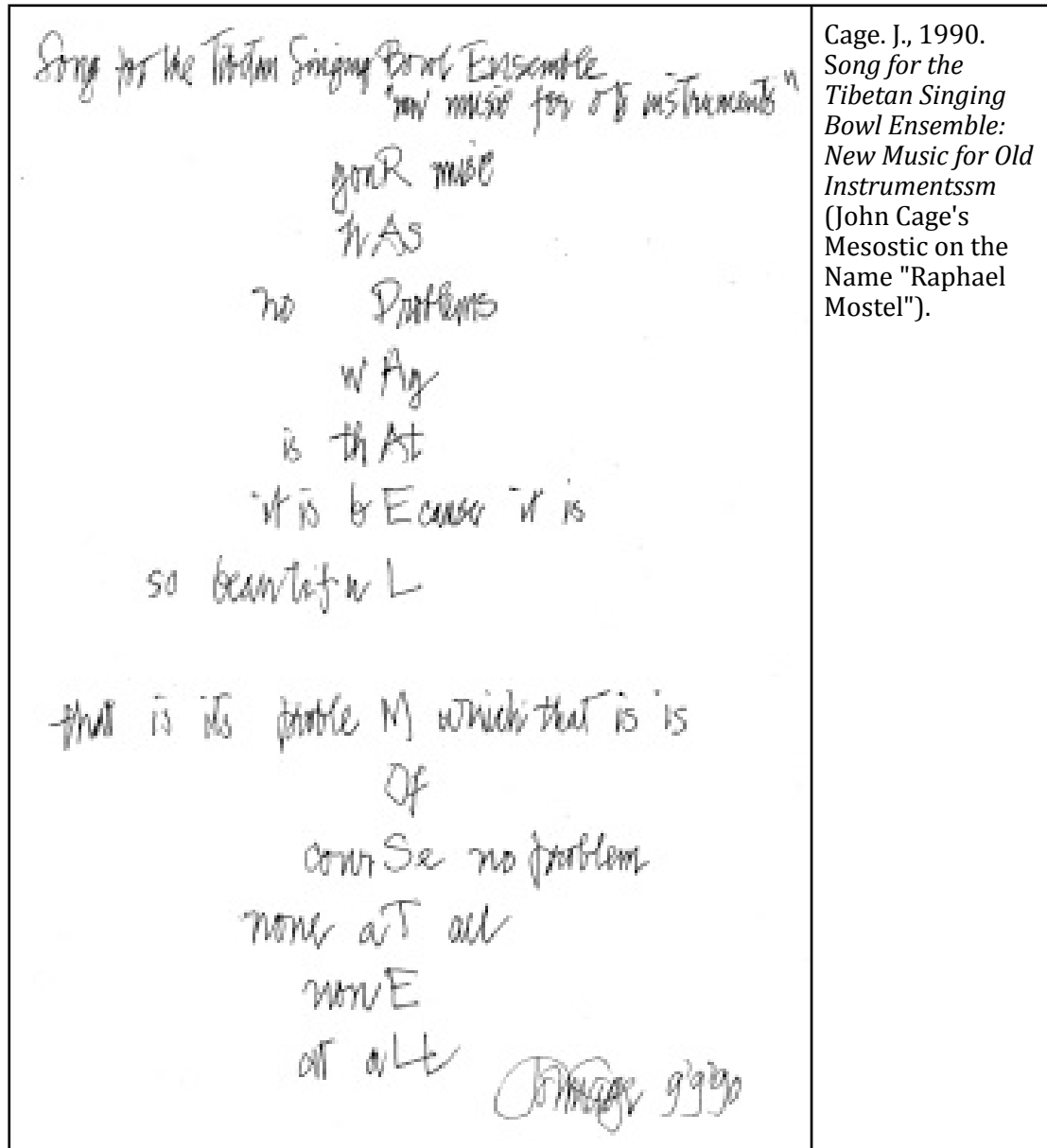
Take, for example, Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951).⁵⁵ In the composition, the score was conceived using the Chinese "Book of Changes," the "I Ching." The performance includes 12 radios, 24 performers, and a director. Each radio has two players; one controls the frequency the radio is tuned to, and the other controls the volume level. Cage wrote very precise instructions in the score about how the performers should set their radios and change them over time, but he left the actual sound coming out of them to chance; it was dependent on whatever radio shows were playing at the time and place of performance. Every performance was unique. As a further development from his previous work, this piece includes indeterminacy at the level of performance as well as composition. He was selective, not random. But he did not want to make choices according to his own decisions. His reaction to the numbers was his way of making choices without initiating them.

On the surface, Cage's work seems to be "purposeless play" without any serious intention. If we consider his detailed preparation of chance operation, it is difficult to disregard the presence of a certain intention. Marjorie Perloff explains that purposeless play does not mean that any random acts can become art. It means that "the ordinary can provide all that the artist needs to make 'something else.' Indeed, the challenge is to take the ordinary - words like 'it' and 'one' and 'function' and 'situation' - and 'miniaturize' it into 'something'" (Perloff, Music). Ironically, Cage's intention of "something" is "unreadability." It is "a carefully plotted overdetermination designed to overcome our conventional reading habits" (Perloff, Radical).

Chance operation prevents a direct connection between the meaning and the manifestation of artwork. There is always contingency between the two. The rules control the amount of contingency, and the artist's control lies in how much

⁵⁵ As a response to Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1949), the text carries a stronger and more direct sense of morality and social commitment than his later works.

contingency is added or taken out. Thus, the artist's intention is not absent. It intends its own removal, and does so by subjecting itself to indeterminacy. This is highlighted in Cage's silent music. Then the question is how we should understand this paradox, and what it signifies to us. It will help us if we examine his notion of nothing.



Cage, J., 1990. *Song for the Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble: New Music for Old Instrumentssm* (John Cage's Mesostic on the Name "Raphael Mostel").

According to Lucy R. Lippard, Cage stated that his "plunge into the void (his silent musical composition) came after Rauschenberg's white paintings" (Colpitt, p. 54). She then links this to Stéphane Mallarmé. She tells us that Mallarmé "proposed to reject symbolic interpretation of poetry and to leave nothing but the white page" - in his own terms, "evocative of all because it contained nothing" (Colpitt, p. 54). We see here the re-circulation of the artistic issues of intention and abstraction.

A century apart, both Mallarmé and Cage employed chance for the formal arrangements of their works in an attempt to free themselves from conventional mannerisms. For *the Livre*, unlike a regular book, Mallarmé planned to have the pages unbound, and each reading of *the Livre* would be subject to its given permutation of assemblage (Scherer, pp. 58-61). For his *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, Cage wrote instructions in the score about how the performers should set their radios and change them over time, but he left the actual sound coming out of them to chance.

Cage stated his intention of nothing, and carried it out, using the chance operation of *I-Ching*. In comparison, in his utopian ambition of writing a total book, Mallarmé never finished *the Livre*. What we have are his plans in the matter of what *the Livre* would be like, as in Schérer's book, and his ideologies of a book which would contain the whole world. Mallarmé famously wrote "tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre (The world exists to end in a book ⁵⁶)" (1945, p. 378). Cage attempted to say nothing, and Mallarmé attempted to say everything. Their intentions differed, but they arrived at the same result. Something and nothing are two sides of the same thing.

As Perloff mentions, *nothing* allows all possible *something* without the artist's predetermination. The intention of non-intention was Cage's way of counterbalancing the two kinds of artistic expression which he found inevitable: one "from the personality of the composer" and the other "from the nature and context of the materials" (2000, p. 34). Ideally, he let it emanate "not consciously striven for, but simply allowed to arise naturally." He uses "[s]ilence, like music, non-existent. There always are sounds" (2000, p. 152). Only closed minds cannot hear the sounds. Shunning "the desire for self-expression" (2000, p. 34), his music comes from his "self-alteration" (2000, p. 154) in emptying out prejudices and desires from the mind. Only then is the mind ready for any "something" without being filtered by personal likes and dislikes. He aimed for absolute acceptance.

Cage's notion of nothing can only be understood in terms of his philosophical disinterestedness, derived from Zen Buddhism; and chance operation was the method for executing it in a structure without which the notion of nothing is

⁵⁶ The quote from Bloy is "there is nothing perfectly beautiful except what is invisible and above all unbuyable."

invisible. Cage's chance operation is strictly rule-bound, and one has to accept whatever number given. It works as a way of providing "a leap out of reach of one's own grasp of oneself" (1973, p. 162). In this sense, his method resembles East Asian scholar painters' strict practice of painting.

Cage's "silence" is muteness of tonality (in the language of music), not absence of sound. In a similar sense, his "nothing" implies eliminating a single meaning for the audience to dwell on. Cage wanted his audiences to *use* his work as a way to discover life when the work is no longer there for them. When the work becomes a means to deliver a meaning, then gaining it would be the end without contributing anything back to life. It becomes a mere piece of knowledge. The work can integrate into the audience's life, only when it loses its purity as a work of art, and dissolves into the continuum of life. This is what is implicitly involved in the debates between Cavell and Beardsley and Wimsatt, and also what appears to be at the tension between Cavell's wanting to know the artist's intention, and Cage's attempting not to give it: the battle between the audience of early modernism and the artist of late modernism. By gaining what he wanted, the audience remains in the tradition of the institutionalised commerce with art of early modernism. The work is consumed as a meaningful work of art for the price paid.

Amid this battle between the audience's demand (Cavell) for intention and the artist's disavowal (Cage) of intention, anti-art has laid the base of what Bürger means by "the institution of art". In Bürger's theory, the avant-garde failed because it could not eliminate the gap between producer and recipient (1974, p. 53), and art still remained as an institution of art. However, the institution of art itself would necessarily not be a problem. It was merely a surviving device of anti-art in order to facilitate its function as art. The main problem is in how it is used. Since art is not understandable, mediation is required to respond to questions like "Is this art?", either by the artist herself, by critics, or by art experts. Someone with authority should explain why this object which does not look or sound like art has to be accepted as art. Sontag explained the aesthetics of silence, which could not speak for itself. And Cage spoke out for nothing. For non-communicative art, the words of critics and artists were necessary in order to disseminate the point of the art.

As Cavell points out, it is often the case that the inescapable power of the words “will usurp motivation altogether, no longer tested by the results they enable” (p. 208). The work does not make sense on its own, and is overcome by the artist’s words explaining her intention. As Pippin explains, in Hegel’s terms, art has finally become a concept. It allows the total autonomy of anti-art, the highest state of self-determination. The porcelain urinal of Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) is art, and the silence in Cage’s *4’33”* (1952) is music, only because they presented them as such.

Sontag says the choice of silence doesn’t negate the work, but, on the contrary, “it imparts retroactively an added power and authority to what was broken off; disavowal of the work becoming a new source of its validity, a certificate of unchallengeable seriousness” (1967, p. 183). There is more to the story. This empowerment was achieved not through the artwork itself, but through the trick of self-negation. Contrary to Cavell’s claim, anti-art was very relevant to tradition. It knew what was regarded as art in tradition, and used it in order to oppose it. Cage explains this in speaking of deceptive cadences. “The idea is this: progress in such a way as to imply the presence of a tone not actually present; then fool everyone by not landing on it – land somewhere else: What is being fooled? Not the ear but the mind” (1973, p. 116). It is not that there is no sound. Only the mind in search of certain sounds misses the sound that the ear hears. The theme of *wu-wei* reoccurs. Only an intention without what is intended can hear all sound available. However, Cage did not forget to leave audiences with what they eventually wanted – intention. Words of philosophy come faster than the “stupidity” (Sontag, 1967, p. 183) of art which cannot speak for itself.

This situation engenders the separation between intention in art (significance or a point of attention) that is elicited and sustained primarily by the object, and the artist’s (conscious) human intention (purpose or desire) for making such an object in such a way. The former is quiet and implicit. Its presence of a tangible body challenges human knowledge (in the language of society). The latter is noisy and assertive. It affirms what is wanted, and lives on words of human desire. Cage avoided tonality as a way to free ears from the structure of music. Cage’s theory of nothing was only his ultimate dream of Zen. Barthes’s notion of the neutral is only his attitude towards life (2005), not his reality. He could remain as a writer only

by delivering his point, despite his claim of the death of the author. What defines the work of art, the artist's words or the body of the work? And what should we believe when what the artists say differs from what they do?

The seriousness of these philosophical words comes at the price of defacing the art itself. First, art is used as a decoy to divert attention by playing out nothing. In order to establish its claim of non-intention, anti-art has to subdue its bodily substance, and then it voluntarily gives away its own interpretation of the work. It deliberately fails at fulfilling its premise of non-art/non-intention in order to succeed at survival. Self-negation was used as a tactic in order to play the practical joke of anti-art.

While Cage was explaining his meaning of nothing, his practice of "a clean slate" has been a new tradition of modern times. Why did he have to talk about nothing, instead of practising the Zen idea as it should be? Those East Asian scholar painters did not need to talk about their practice. There was the tradition shared in mutual understanding, and they had no audience per se, in the modern Western sense. Without this foundational base, Cage's philosophy had to be explained and his practice of art had to be assertive. This practice of assertion, armoured by the violation of language, has outdone the mute intention of art.

The self-negation of anti-art underlines the problem of intention in modern art regarding lack of tradition – tradition built on a set of prejudices, based on shared beliefs. Within it, intention is understood without the need for explanation. This is what Cavell calls the tradition of music, and what Cage opposed. However, modern tradition, since the break of modernism, is manipulated by a set of "instrumental or coordinating strategies", in Pippin's terms (2005, p. 11), that are implemented within public life. What used to be understood on shared common ground, and naturally transformed, is now implicitly induced, as per Eco's suggestion, and rigidly enforced till it becomes habitual and thus natural without one's own agreement. Institution decides what art is or should be, and individuals accept it as it is given.

Pippin makes his point in this context:

“[a]ny traces of genuine subjectivity detectable in a modern form of life ... will thus be traces of the presence of practical reason in human practices, a presence beyond instrumental or coordinating strategies” (2005, p. 11).

What Pippin calls historical self-consciousness will be possible only when each member participates in that project of questioning tradition. Then, the collective body of society will eventually orient itself in that direction. The changes happen in the composite perception, some apperceived and some not apperceived. Leibniz likens this to the roar of the waves of the beach; the singular sound one can hear is in fact made up of a vast number of individual sounds one cannot identify individually. Individuals are like *petite perceptions* in his terminology, not-apperceived perceptions. These *petite perceptions* engender innumerable minor habits and customs, and accumulate continuously and gradually, eventually, to change perception. What Barthes and Cage were against is a predetermined and blindly sought system of thinking which prohibits people’s from freely pursuing their share of self-consciousness towards restoring the bridge between society and the individual. Barthes’s life-long battle against language, and Cage’s persistent recalling of nothing are their ways of participating in that struggle shared by all others in this pursuit, regardless of the results.

Self-negation itself was not what they meant. As in the case of wu-wei, their saying of nothing or the neutral cannot be literally accepted. If they practised what they said, their words would not have survived to reach us. Practice – like life – can never be negative. Cage’s saying “I have nothing to say and I am saying it” is his way of practising the idea of nothing – not what is said, but the fact that he said it is what counts. Barthes also did not stop writing, even though he talked about the neutral. Nothing and the neutral are their styles or manners of pursuing (positive) life. They are their compromises for leading a life that requires making choices – holding one’s point of view or stance. The empty content of nothing or the neutral enables a placeholder without any semantic information. Barthes’s struggle with the semantic dogma of language correlates with his adaptation of art’s muteness for his strategy of the neutral. However it is questionable how it is possible to eliminate the very nature of language – socially constructed meaning.

Barthes’s earlier work, *Writing Degree Zero*, displays his concern with the apparent separation of the individual from society that was inherent in the

modernist ideas. He provides unique insight into the issue of intention through an individual's social responsibility in her productivity. He analyses the act of writing in the relationship between the writer and his society. He offers the notion of *écriture* (writing) as a way of bridging between the individual "style" and the "language" of society. Style refers to the individual's personal conventions (e.g. habitual behaviours), which are built through her biographical history; while language refers to the social conventions to which each individual is subject.

He argues that these two "objects" of convention escape the individual's control. They are a given condition, not a matter of choice. Language is the fundamental order in which she is formed. He explains that it is "a corpus of prescriptions and habits common to all the writers of a period". And yet "[i]t is not the locus of a social commitment, but merely reflex response involving no choice, the undivided property of men, not of writers; ... it is a social object by definition, not by option" (1953, p. 9). For Barthes, "writing is a way of conceiving Literature, not of extending its limits", because the maker cannot modify the convention of language which governs the reception of the work (1953, p. 15). On the other hand, style is the writer's habitual ways of grasping the world, in her personal and biological conditions, over the passage of time. It belongs solely to the individual's "personal and secret mythology" (1953, p. 10), and is "entirely alien to language"; "[b]y reason of its biological origin, style resides outside art, that is, outside the pact which binds the writer to society" (1953, p. 12). It is outside the language, which is common to all social members. The language of society and the style of the writer are disconnected, in their antagonistic relationship.

The only thing that she can claim as her own is *écriture*. As a "function", *écriture* allows her to commit herself to society, and consequentially to connect style (the way she is) and language (the way she is expected to be). *Écriture* is her act of participating in life in order to fulfil her moral obligations to her society. It is located in the intersection of the horizon of language and the vertical dimension of style. Barthes explains that the "human horizon" of language "provides a distant setting of familiarity" (1953, p. 10) which is "the undivided property of men" (1953, p. 9), and by contrast, style grows in the vertical dimension of "the transmutation of Humour", the writer's biological and biographical changes (1953, p. 11). These two "together map out for the writer a Nature"; "the natural

product of Time [a familiar History] and of the person as a biological entity [a familiar personal past]" (1953, p. 13). At this intersection, the writer commits herself to society in "écriture" (writing), bridging her individual "style" and the "language" of society.

The writer merely makes "a reflex response", "involving no choice", "in the manner of Natural Order" in which language stands (1953, pp. 9-10). Style "become[s] the very reflexes of his art": "the product of a thrust, not an intention" (1953, pp. 10-11). A Nature is "a familiar repertory of gestures, a gestuary, as it were, in which the energy is purely operative, ... but never to appraise or signify a choice (1953, p. 13). The writer's intention is not possible in language or style. The act of écriture is where the writer can commit himself by becoming "a total sign, the choice of a human attitude, ... of his utterance, which is at once normal and singular, to the vast History of the Others" (1953, p. 14). Barthes asserts "it is the relationship between creation and society, ... , form considered as a human intention and thus linked to the great crises of History" (1953, p. 14). Barthes locates the mode of écriture in "the writer's consideration of the social use which he has chosen for his form, and his commitment to this choice" (1953, p. 15). Here, "choice is a matter of conscience, not of efficacy" (1953, p. 15).⁵⁷ Écriture "is free only in the gesture of choice" (1953, p. 16), which is also her responsibility.

And the opaqueness of style, covered under vertical layers accumulated during the person's lifetime, is falsely clarified in "the objective data" (1953, p. 15) of language. This false objective data of the style which circulates the public domain overdetermines the identity of the personal style, whose impenetrable opaqueness is produced by personal conventions of the individual's life. Thus, the freedom of subjectivity is questionable.

The only freedom that is allowed to the artist is the commitment: trying to act according to her responsibility. The trying is always in the process, without being fully accomplished. In this trying, as the existence of her style proves, the artist's subjectivity is not absent, but suspended, partly defined by the language of society. The artist's free subjectivity is in her pursuit of her intention at the locus of écriture where her personal style and the social language are conjoined.

⁵⁷ Originally from "An Interrupted Story" (in: Cowart and Fourcade, *Henry Matisse*, pp. 47-57).

Through these mildly fragmented passages, Barthes displays what will become his style of the neutral in fragments. Also, the ideas of non-intention or neutral intention are revealed through words like “reflex response” or “involving no choice”. More importantly, it is not that the writer chooses her sign, but becomes a total sign by doing *écriture*. Thus the sign is not a matter of choice in writing, but a consequence of the life of writing.

In later years, Barthes briefly introduces a subsequent concept of a “scriptor” in “The Death of the Author” (1967). It is the writer’s mode which does not possess a personal history, but exists only at the moment of writing. Unlike the case with *écriture*, Barthes completely denies the scriptor any human trace of the Author. The writer of *écriture* is divided into two concepts - the scriptor and the Author-God. The scriptor is the physical entity of the writer; it is the body at work (*écriture*), simply combining pre-existing texts. It merely facilitates the gesture of inscription, carrying out its impersonal and automatic performance (1967, p. 148). It has no origin, or at best originates in language itself (1967, p. 146). In contrast, the Author, as a human person in her particular social and biological roles, is the modernist figure of artistic genius who governs the meaning of the work.

Barthes’s distinction between writer and author is subtle yet significant. The Author, with a capital A, is the name of the person who owns the truth of the text. It is a myth that ostensibly guides the reader in a certain direction without diverging from the truth, controlling the reading of the text. Barthes explains the Author’s ownership of the text in its historical details:

“The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, ... , it discovered the prestige of the individual, ... , the ‘human person’. ... The author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. ... The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (1967, pp. 142-143).

In contrast to this, the scriptor is the physical identity of the writer after all identity of the Author is removed; it is the name of the body in writing. It only facilitates the speaking of language at the moment of writing, but does not linger around demanding its ownership or claiming the genius of creation. Barthes contrasts the two. The Author governs and owns text outside of her act of writing, whereas the scriptor lives only at the moment of “enunciation” of the work, neither before nor after.

“The Author, ... , is always conceived of as the part of his book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it ... as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text ... ; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*” (1967, p. 145).

Writing is “a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression)”. The scriptor writes “at the cost of the death of the Author” in its impersonal and automatic performance (1967, p. 148).

Barthes rejects the originality of text, because the language that the writer speaks is never hers, but “a ready-formed dictionary”, formed by the culture, and the act of expression is mere imitation of the cultural practice.

“The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. ... [T]he writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to encounter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely”(1967, p. 146).

Even what the writer attempts to express from her inner mind is a given set of knowledge prior to her, and she only inscribes the signs of the dictionary.

Since there is neither original writing nor an authentic voice to assign “ultimate meaning” from the Author, the text has nothing to decipher underneath the surface of signs. Writing is finally freed from the Author that limits and closes with the final signified. Text is “a multi-dimensional space ... to be ranged over, not

pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning." In this space, scriptor is a medium through which multiple meanings are filtered indefinitely, bouncing, clashing and blending at its every point and level (1967, pp. 146-147). The reader, the destination of the text, "holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted"; the meaning is born.

In relation to Barthes's text, in "What Is an Author?" (1977), Foucault points out the complicated difficulties around the name of an author regarding the definition of the word "work." He asks:

"What, in short, is the strange unit designated by the term, work? What is necessary to its composition, if a work is not something written by a person called an "author?" ... If an individual is not an author, what are we to make of those things he has written or said, left among his papers or communicated to others? Is this not properly a work?" (p. 118)

Without "the individuality of the writer", the word "work" cannot have its definition. Those who by-pass the status of the author, e.g. Barthes, fail to note the problem following the nature of the word "work." The death of the author results in the death of the work (p. 119).

This is also the point that Eco makes by introducing intentional openness, and stressing the artist's responsibility for her work and its reading. The link between the artist and her work is evaluated in respect to the work of its initiator, returning to the origin (p. 134). It is simply because it is *work*, which was produced by that particular person, and her name conditions the understanding of the work (p. 136). Even if a work does not have a name, reading demands search for the origin. Otherwise, what is it that the audience looks at? To read is to study the structures of the work "for their intrinsic and internal relationships" (p. 118), and for the trace of the originator's intention. Denying the responsibility of an artist is denying the freedom of the audience.

Conversely, work is constructed based on this hypothesis of receiving as such. The meaning of the work is not the same as the Author's meaning, to be deciphered in the aura of her authentic voice, but it is what drives the scriptor "to mix writings, to encounter the ones with the others" (1967, p. 146). It is the only, yet most

fundamental, power that the scriptor can afford to making art as work; the scriptor's function of *écriture* is carried out through this power. The artist's responsibility towards the society inevitably requires the scriptor to stand on the base of her human intention. The scriptor in its pure mode, as Barthes would have it, cannot understand the writer's human desire for moral commitment. The writer discovers her earnest humanness in the impersonal neutrality of the scriptor.

As with the anti-art of the avant-garde artists, Barthes's scriptor is bound to its paradox. The question of choice arises regarding the scriptor's *écriture*. The scriptor's act of combining requires choice, and choice requires judgements according to an intention. Given the death of the Author (the human person who controls the reading of the text), it is questionable where the intention originates from, if not from the scriptor. The same question is applied to Cage's detailed instructions for the performance of chance operation. If no intention is involved, then where do the instructions come from? In its relation to the concept of *écriture*, the scriptor's intention comes instead from the intersection between style and language (in Barthes's terms). At the precise point of making, the artist finds her most neutral intention, which is both individual and social. Matisse's theme for painting resonates: "When you have a real feeling for nature, you can create signs which are equivalent to both the artist and the spectator" ("The Path of Colour" 1947, cited in 1978, p. 116). For this task, the scriptor takes over the author of the artist, and executes its unintentional automatic performance. However, how the Author and the scriptor reconcile with each other remains unresolved.

In his later book *The Neutral* (2005), Barthes elaborates the difficulty of abandoning human intention, and retaining the scriptor in perfection. The disinterested intention of scriptor is only possible in the presence of the writer's vigilant watch for the power conflict, generative of meaning and paradigm – "the wellspring of meaning" (p. 7). Barthes states: "meaning rests on conflict ... : to choose one and refuse the other is always a sacrifice made to meaning, to produce meaning, to offer it to be consumed" (p. 7). It requires a sacrifice of the other for the one chosen, and hence "no Neutral is possible in the field of power" (p. 116). Barthes's desire for the Neutral is his attempt to cancel out this power game of

meaning. It starts from his refusal of explaining the word “the Neutral.” Instead, he gathers fragments under the name Neutral “as that which outplays {*déjoue*} the paradigm”, or rather “everything that baffles the paradigm” (p. 6). The Neutral is a consequential call of his persistent passion for “carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning” (1967, p. 147).

In this, as Barthes notes, the desire for the Neutral is in a paradox of its ideal: “the Neutral means suspension of violence”, but even so the desire accompanies violence (2005, p. 13). Even the choice of the Neutral is also a choice, and demands the sacrifice of the other choice, of not choosing the Neutral.

In order to compensate for this intrinsic paradox, Barthes constructs another set of paradoxes, i.e. unmarketable desire. He explains that desire is always marketable. (Here is my example: What we trade is not the actual thing, but our desire. I buy the object of my desire to satisfy that desire. The actual thing does not have any intrinsic value. My desire, which is made visible by the thing, sets its value to make it marketable.) Against this general rule, the desire for the Neutral is “unmarketable” because it is “unsustainable.” Usual kinds of desire are marketable for the promise that they are sustainable. Being unsustainable, the desire of the Neutral exempts itself from the market, and attains “its absolute singularity” for its owner (2005, p. 13). The desire belongs only to its originator; so does its violence. He describes it as “inexpressible” (2005, p. 13).

His subtle anxiety over his choice of terms demonstrates his ongoing theme of the Neutral. Barthes replaces “invisible” in Bloy’s words⁵⁸, which he initially quotes, with “unsustainable”. The invisible tempts human imagination with its visible representation, yet it is always distant from the human world by its very nature of silent invisibility, unreachable by human capacity. It oppresses the enquirer with its power of hidden meaning. Unlike the invisible, the unsustainable presupposes the transitory actuality of the desire, followed by the fate of fading away. It is rooted to the earthly condition of our mortality. Barthes attempts his desire for the Neutral – invisible – through the visible nature of reality.

In practise, the Neutral is defined in relation to the paradigm – this is the first paradox of the Neutral – it demands that we choose it. Making a choice always

⁵⁸ An interview with Degand” (1945).

requires consideration of ethics. For Barthes, it is his human struggle to suspend the power order of paradigm and meaning. The struggle finds its value in its “intense, strong, unprecedented states” (2005, p. 7). His Neutral is his standpoint, in defiance of all power orders of meaning and paradigm that have been established prior to him. He adds: “a reflection on the Neutral, for me: a manner – a free manner – to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time” (2005, p. 8).

This statement concludes his passage from style as an object of convention (as in *Writing Degree Zero*) to style as his Neutral of absolute singularity (2005, p. 7). The former is a conventional object of personal features built through a biographical history in the name of subject, separate from social conventions. It is not a matter of choice, but a thing given to and imprinted into the subject. The latter is a singular mode of the desire for the Neutral: a personal effort to carry out responsibility for the desire, without any wish to possess (2005, p. 7). Without the wish (for the future), the desire for the Neutral stands only at the present.

This singularity of the Neutral is germane to the concept of the scriptor in *écriture*. The scriptor endures “a mourning” of departing from each moment, and is reborn for a new one (Barthes, 2005, p.13). In its horizontal and vertical singularity – as an individual subject on the geographical plane, at a single moment of the given historical line, the scriptor performs her automatic task of mixing and combining the fragments of “a ready-formed dictionary” (1967, p. 146).

However, the scriptor does not know her intention – “the inner ‘thing’” (1967, p. 146) – for what she does. She can only translate it into the language of the world. Nonetheless, the dictionary only describes the translation, not what the intention is. The intention exists in the negative space where all things of matter are exhausted and absent. At the edge of this space, the artist attempts to do her part of the scriptor through writing or making art, while the intention withdraws from her indefinitely.

We cannot give a name to what withdraws, let alone have any knowledge of it. It refuses entry into the earthly world of the ready-formed dictionary (1976, pp. 8-9). Instead, we are drawn to it without knowing where it is going, beyond the

scope of that dictionary. It is indescribable in the language of the dictionary. Heidegger offers his insight into withdrawal:

“But, withdrawing is not nothing. Withdrawal is an event. ... Once we are drawn into the withdrawal, we are drawing toward what draws, attracts us by its withdrawal. And once we, being so attracted, are drawing towards what draws us, our essential nature already bears the stamps of ‘drawing toward.’ As we are drawing toward what withdraws, we ourselves are pointers pointing toward it. We are who we are by pointing in that direction To say ‘drawing toward’ is to say ‘pointing toward what withdraws’” (1976, p. 9).

I propose the addition of *awareness* to his concept of “being drawn into” or “pointing toward” what withdraws. Once we are aware of being “drawn into” what withdraws, we are no longer in a passive mode, but in an active mode of “drawing toward” it; it is a matter of choice. The content of the choice is not from the artist, but from what the artist is drawn into. The awareness contains the artist’s choice to be drawn into it. It is her (intentional) self-consciousness without its content.

An artwork is the trace of the artist’s voluntary act of being “drawn into” something that draws her. In Heidegger’s words, it is “a pointer, ... that is not read” (1976, p. 18). It points “into what withdraws, into mutable nearness of its appeal” (1976, p. 17). The artist can draw only to that nearness of that something, but it cannot be known. At best, she can describe the awareness of her acts of “drawing into” and “pointing toward” it. Even then, the description is a mere translation of this awareness in human language. Thus, the awareness cannot be fully described, and the act of being drawn is prolonged. The scriptor, without its initiative power, is drawn into its own act of weaving threads of language in a certain style.

With respect to Barthes’s descriptions of *écriture*, such as “reflex response” or “involving no choice”, the scriptor can be equivalent to the East Asian concept of the unique brush stroke, with the emphasis on process and practice as common denominators. The ink, the brush, and the unique brush strokes of Chinese painting can be equivalent to Barthes’s notions of language, style and *écriture*. The ink (“a technical acquisition”) is equivalent to language (social knowledge),

and the brush (“man’s contribution”) to style (personal reception of that social knowledge). The ink and the brush, like language and style, are objects in the painter’s hands. These pairs are actualised by the execution of the unique brush stroke of *écriture*. This fleeting moment of singularity is where the subject’s intention comes alive, as its specificity of signifying practice engages with the two objects.

The process of writing, as opposed to the purpose of writing (communication), is Barthes’s main point regarding his resistance against meaning. Critics have highlighted this point of Barthes, by contrasting his *écriture* for “textualization” “at the site of signifying process” against Sartre’s *écrire* for “totalization” “at the origin or end of the signifying process” (Silverman, p. 238).

For Sartre, a work of literature is a means to communicate the (prose) writer’s essentiality to the reader (Silverman, p. 238). The book is a tool, like a hammer. It does not serve freedom, but requires it – “the free invention of means” (Sartre, 1949, p. 47). Thus Sartre does not count what the poet does as the activity of writing. It is to poetise, not to write. “The poet is outside of language” (Sartre, 1949, p. 13).

In contrast to Sartre, Barthes finds the writer’s free moment in the act of writing, not in the content of writing. To Barthes, this act of writing is subject to language and style – two objects of convention which “together map out for the writer a Nature” (Barthes, 1953, p. 13), outside her choice.

According to Barthes, what Sartre regards as free invention of meaning is only the writer’s personal manifestation of a normative meaning, pre-given by social convention. There is no self-determined meaning originating from the author. This is the premise for Barthes’s “The Death of the Author”. The only free intention that the writer can have is the commitment to writing. The content is socially given, but the writing proceeds through the momentary disclosure of the writer’s singular gesture. The scriptor is an unavoidable device for Barthes’s construction of *écriture* in the absence of the Author (authorial meaning). It is the body at work which facilitates the speaking of language, through its impersonal and automatic performance of *écriture* at the moment of the “enunciation” (1967, p. 148).

To overcome the limits of language (the limits of a finite meaning), Barthes invented the scriptor in écriture. But the scriptor's efforts to poetise outside language are in vain. Barthes took a different route from Sartre, only to reach the same destination. Like Cage's chance operations, that use the *I-Ching*, Barthes used fragmentation and digression in his operation of the Neutral for his writing. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978) and *The Neutral* (2005) are examples. But he could only go as far as fragmentation, not to the point of anti-art. This illustrates the power of language, and its distinction from the images of art regarding meaning and intention.

Art may negate itself by abandoning its tradition, but writing cannot. Because even when art does not communicate to the audience the way a text does, it still has the body of the object. But for writing, text is all it can offer. Even if the writer's freedom can only be found in writing, the essence of writing is communication, which lives on tradition, and the scriptor of writing cannot escape that condition. The writer's scriptor is at work *on*, not *in*, the sensuous immediacy. The sensuous immediacy loses its innocence: it becomes tamed and converted to be readable. Yet, it is a strange contradiction. Because of this readability, the words are understood as the writer's, and the authorial power is inevitably imposed over the reader as the writer's subjectivity in the same manner as the authorial power of anti-art is imposed. For this reason, Barthes fails at being neutral.

The Neutral is Barthes's final expression of his persistent passion for "carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning" (1967, p. 147). It is his best possible compromise with the persistence of intention. The desire for the Neutral contains a paradox or contradiction: it demands a choice of not choosing. The Neutral remains only as a desire which can never be fulfilled.

However, Barthes's failure teaches us how art is different from writing. Art, like writing, communicates, yet it escapes the closure of textual meaning. Barthes entertains the hope of escape with his "third meaning" (after the denoted first message at an informational level, and the connoted second message of "the obvious meaning" at a symbolic level) in relation to image. This is the place for the scriptor. Third (obtuse) meaning is "theoretically locatable but not

describable" (1970a, p. 65) because of its lack of "the diegetic horizon" (1970a, p. 66) of social language. The viewer is endlessly held by the image, unable to absorb its meaning. As image, art endlessly escapes the confinement of language.

Abstract art challenges even this third meaning and the notion of meaning all together, which troubles the viewer. It does not refer to life, where the artist and the audience coexist. It is experiential, and only the ones who have gone through experiences similar to those of the artist may get something out of it. Thus, it is merely a transcription of the artist's experience of seeing. It demonstrates that art can be irrelevant to tradition, and does not need to be read. This is where the artist and the viewer need – and are allowed – to rely solely on their most personal and subjective opinion of their seeing. Whatever is in that seeing, the situation seems tricky; it is not even locatable, let alone being describable. Yet the artist still tries to transmit, and the viewer searches for a meaning. And both lack the proper tool – tradition. Thus the audience's demand of intention, and the artist's searching for meaning in her work continue.

This project of self-consciousness by early modernists painters was taken over by the utopian ideology of de Stijl or Suprematism, and then by blank canvases of monochrome paintings by the artist like Robert Rauschenberg. Barthes's journey from *écriture* to neutral coincides with the advance of art from modernism, to Avant-garde, to Indeterminacy. We now live in a different era from that of Cage and Rauschenberg. The avant-garde's anti-art no longer holds its currency. Once it shook the boundary between art and non-art, but the anti-art of avant-garde art has now become a standard formula of contemporary art, and it reinforces the institution of art.

This is an irony of our time, or the fate of art which cannot remove itself from its social functions. The struggle with intention, since the dawn of modernism, in various incarnations has failed. Art is consumed and utilised by members of society. Only the form of consumption changes depending on the mode of society: depicting God in pre-modern art, expressing the artist's genius in modernist art, negating art in avant-garde art, and standardising anti-art in contemporary art. Unless we are in the same situation as East Asian scholar painters who could

indulge themselves in their scholastic artistry of painting, the artist is obliged to find meaning or intention in her work.

In sympathy with Eco's regret, our civilisation is still far from that of Zen sage (1962, p.100). In other words, it will never be the one for us. We must pursue our own way according to the nature of our human landscape that surrounds us. Thus, the neutral requires continual rebirth. As the neutral was Barthes's compromise and also Cage's, intention of non-intention remains as a mode of living, fighting against ourselves and our pre-determined intention – the battle against language. Intention persists, and its irreducibility in art haunts us.

7. Uncertainty as Thinking

The abstract artists whom Pippin uses as examples of abstractionism in modernist art, and the artists of anti-art cannot give good answers to the question of self-consciousness. The former indulged in its subjectivity only to abandon it for absolute objectivity, and the latter plunged into the most extreme case of abstraction – nothing. The historical self-consciousness can only be saved by early modernist artists through their questioning of themselves, inflicted by their own emotions, the locus – locatable, but not describable.

The early modernist painters suffered from lack of language (the social dimension of the human world) at two levels: lack of tradition at the verge of historical change, and lack of clarity for its nature as image. Absence of these two types of language, historical and innate, pushed them outside the familiar landscape of common understanding, i.e. tradition, the practice of unquestionable familiarities. Outside language, the artist's intention is questioned.

Art history records Matisse's repeated questioning of himself in painting - "What do I want?". He confesses:

"There are so many things I would like to understand, and most of all *myself*—after a half a century of hard work and reflection, the wall is still there. *Nature—or rather my nature—remains mysterious*. Meanwhile I believe I have put a little order in my chaos by keeping alive the tiny light that guides me and still energetically answers the frequent enough S O S. I am not intelligent" (Matisse, unpublished letter to Georges Besson, December 1938, cited in Bock-Weiss, p. 175).⁵⁹

His endless search for clarity of his feelings and sensations locked him in the irreducible unknown, the endless doubt of his conviction.

But, we also hear Matisse's affirmative voice: "I work from feeling. I have my conception in my head, and I want to realize it. I can, very often, reconceive it ... But I know where I want it to end up. ...; whether I am advancing or regressing" (1978, p. 103).⁶⁰ Even though Matisse was clearly aware of the feeling

⁵⁹ Originally cited in "On Transformations" (1942).

⁶⁰ Eco himself mentions a Zen Sage.

in himself, he still could not understand the self being aware of it, even at the end of his painting career. If it is not his, then whose?

Unlike other kinds of doing, “expressing” requires understanding. We do not need to understand the door in order to open it, but we need to understand what we want to express in order to express it. Matisse calls this understanding in making art, “condensation” and “fermentation”. Raw bodily sensations, what Collingwood calls “crude feeling at the merely psychic level” (1958, p. 244), become matured and distilled into understanding – a feeling of form which resembles the initial crude feeling, yet goes beyond it. In this way, it can become the painter’s own emotion on a higher level – the meaning of the painting. Seeing becomes knowing.

Brendan Prendeville (2005) presents this conversion from seeing to knowing, in his inquiries of Damisch’s terms “voir” (seeing) and “savoir” (knowing). He concludes that the “change” escapes the viewer’s attention at the “hinge” of these two states. This term “hinge” refers to Wittgenstein’s “hinge propositions” in *On Certainty* (1975).

Wittgenstein affirms: “‘We are quite sure of it’ does not mean just that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education” (p. 38e, no. 298). Certain things should not be doubted, and laid as the foundation of all our beliefs. He says “If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put” (p. 44e, no. 343). He calls those unquestioned beliefs at the base of society as “hinge propositions”, and they are exempted from our practice of inquiring. They are the constitutional propositions that yield further propositions, so that we can gain the shared reality of the world that we all belong to. By constituting the inquiring, they let us lead our lives without being caught in the endless cycle of inquiring. They cannot be questioned for this practical reason. “‘I know’ expresses *comfortable certainty*”, “a form of life”, beyond justification, like an animal instinct to survive (pp. 46-47, no. 357-359). Certainty is a matter of attitude, not of the truth (p. 52e, no. 404). We accept the propositions not because we are certain that they are true, but because we need prior propositions in order to build our knowledge of reality. Thus the conversion from “voir” (seeing) to “savoir” (knowing) is the comfortable certainty that allows us to lead human life in society.

The motivation for the conversion from seeing to knowing is clear. I question, then, why Matisse had so much doubt about his seeing, roaming around the hinge between knowing and seeing, even though it is clear that he wanted to create “signs which are equivalent to both the artist and the spectator” (“The Path of Colour” 1947, cited in 1978, p. 116). His doubt contrasts with Cézanne’s statement: “We see things; we agree about them; we are anchored in them; and it is with ‘nature’ as our base that we construct our sciences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 64). This simple formula does not seem to apply to Matisse, as his motto “What do I want?” reveals.

The practical reasoning of hinge propositions does not seem applicable to him, or perhaps to all art. Matisse’s uncertainty is not about his knowledge of his self and his feeling, but about his certainty about the knowledge which has already arisen in him. Uncertainty is not directed at his “knowing” (*savoir*), but at his certainty of that knowing. So, he oscillated, not between knowing and unknowing, but between certainty and uncertainty of his knowledge. The proof is the initial hunch. It indicates that he has already reacted to what gave him that shapeless emotion, and that reaction has stepped into his consciousness. Matisse would call it “impassioned impulse” (1978, p. 142). I also apply this expression to East Asian scholar painting in the state of *wu-wei*. These modes of art are characterised by productivity. For Matisse, productivity is in seeing, and this differentiates the labour of seeing from that of manual labour. While the latter concentrates on emptying the mind, the former waits until a sensation of meaning visits the mind. It can be likened to waiting for something in the middle of a desert without knowing from what direction it will come, and then a vague glimpse of a figure shows up from somewhere. This is perhaps what Collingwood means by the expression at a lower level.

It is the manifestation of the self unguarded by a conscious choice or intention. The waiting without knowing what to wait for is the space for the artist’s scriptor. It reacts with its automatic habitual gestures seasoned by the artist’s personal digestion of the social language – her human landscape of conventions. However, its social horizon is not limited to language, as per the writer Barthes, but beyond it, including whatever the artist’s sight could grasp. It is not a horizon of confusion, as Merleau-Ponty (1993, pp. 67-68) explains. It is the artist’s initial

awareness of her automatic reaction conditioned by her habits of mind. This awareness (as self-consciousness) lets her recognise those habits of mind and hold them in front of her as an object of inquiry. Through questioning, the artist can suspend, not eliminate, what she used to take as her (unquestioned and autonomous) subjectivity, and look into it.

Knowing (*savoir*) is already there when the artist is pressed by the initial emotion. Without it, one cannot start thinking to know what it is. It is the beginning of wondering. Once it is located, the artist cannot deny it. Matisse explains: "Feeling is self-contained. You don't say to yourself. ... Feeling is an enemy only when one doesn't know how to express it" (1978, p. 104). The feeling is not necessarily an enemy, when one does not try to know it. It only becomes an enemy, when one tries to turn it into what it is not, from an invisible feeling to a visible object. The feeling itself does not have that sort of characteristic. This anxiety is the self-inflicted problem of the modernist artist trying to convert the feeling into her own at another level of expression.

The artist's expression, following the initial expression of a hunch, distinguishes Matisse's painting, as a representative of modern art practice, from the traditional methods of making art. Tradition is a set of hinge propositions which lets us lead our lives. The painterly practice of East Asian scholar painters was embedded in tradition, but Matisse and early modernist artists had to deal with this "correlative duality" of the body and the soul without a precedent tradition and theory. Even though the modernist artists gained artistic freedom, they could not be free from the need for recognition and acceptance by others. The scholar artists did not need to survive on others' recognition. Thus the modernist artist had to translate the feeling into an object of a human language that she could examine in front of her eyes as her own and enable others to recognise as hers.

The translation requires what Matisse calls condensation of sensations – fermentation of the seeing. The eyes carve out the lump of shapeless emotion into an object of emotion in a meaningful shape. Since the artist does not know what it is yet, the process becomes an inquiry into itself without the possibility of completion. There is a sense of direction, only with the trace – the promise of discovery but never the real thing. The initial sensations are no longer there, only

their traces in memory. As the artist looks at the thing, she examines her own looking in the operation of condensing the traces of the sensations. The looking at her looking, in its self-consciousness, suspends the automatic entry of habitual mind, and crystallises itself into an object that would represent the artist's feeling found in that localised space of looking. In this, the thing she looks at functions as a mirror which reflects her looking back to her. The artist can understand her own looking, only in the reflections of other things. Without them, she cannot even know if she can look.

In her looking, she recognises the sign that she has become in a certain manner. However, in order to be sure of what she sees as a sign of her own, she needs a second opinion – a mirror which allows for her to test if what she has created is a sign. The sign, like a name, is not for the one identified as such. It is for others, to allow them to recognise her as that person. One does not introduce one's name to oneself, but to others.

A modern artist necessarily invents her own signs to communicate with her audiences, and this correlates with the demand of self-consciousness. Matisse was not an exception to the subject-object problem of self-consciousness:

“When I paint a green marble table and finally have to make it red—I am not entirely satisfied, I need several months to recognize that I created a new object just as good as what I was unable to do and which will be replaced by another of the same type when the original which I did not paint as it looked in nature will have disappeared—the eternal question of the object and the subject”⁶¹ (1978, p. 90).

Matisse's seeing involves no final transition at the hinge, but only a slow process of distillation from seeing, without reaching the point of knowing. This distillation is the artist's self-consciousness at work feeling oneself in the operation of seeing.

The demand of assurance is a feature concomitant with modernist subjectivity, and unavoidably accompanies uncertainty. It is not because of incompetence, but because of the desire to know (*savoir*) *more* of what it sees (*voir*). The self unfolds

⁶¹ Suzuki, D., T., *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, foreword by Carl G. Jung (London: Rider, 1983), p. 102.

continuously and does not allow itself any assurance upon which to hinge. The desire for knowing the self is unfulfilled and subjectivity is suspended.

What is self-consciousness? Is it not a vacuum state of observing the self? Then, the primary task of self-consciousness is to discover the self in the familiar landscape of first nature, the repertoire of subjectivity. Only then can one face the foreignness of oneself in those habits which were invisible to oneself.

How is this self-understanding different from trying to understand another person? How can one be certain of the content of the discovery that one thinks is one's subjectivity? Above all, is it not the case that one's judgements can only stem from the habitual first nature?

We are back to the problem of knowing the self. Yet, Wittgenstein's hinge propositions cannot be accepted just for the purpose of yielding a recognisable datum of self-understanding. Barthes explains how this is falsely clarified in "the objective data" (1953, p. 15) of language. We know what we feel, but we cannot be certain of it. So we rely on institutionalised, normalised knowledge which relies on theories and scientific data.

Wittgenstein states "doubting means thinking" (1975, p. 63e, no. 480). Uncertainty does not mean rejection nor denial. Uncertainty lets us ask about things hidden in the familiarity of habits. It entails suspending the social and cultural landscape which forms what we regard as our individual subjectivity. The human intention – what the artist consciously wants – compromises what she sees and feels. Suspending that intention is an attempt to go beneath the foundations of the hinge propositions. It lets us bring the seeing and the feeling into neutral attention, through the "impassioned impulse" of inquiry. It is a mode of intention without any content to impose on others. It allows us to see what we really are. If we want to know ourselves, we must ask, instead of defining. We live as living things, not as words or letters in history books.

What did the modernists gain through this failure to understand the self? In Hegel's schema, for prehistoric humans the unknown was fear; and human history has been an effort to overcome that fear through self-understanding. The animality, the unknown part of the human, passes under the eyes of our

institutionalised and manufactured modern subjectivity and is converted to the “awe towards life” (Matisse, 1978, p. 38) in our self-understanding. Through the overlapping boundaries between the self and the others, one cannot be the self without the others.

If it can be applied anywhere, Hegel’s notion of self-consciousness can be applied here; man is “immediate and single” as a thing in nature; but also, as a thinking consciousness, he duplicates and sees himself. (Lectures in Aesthetics Vol 1, p. 32, tr. Knox) However, the dimension of man’s nature needs to be revised. The condition of being a thinking being is given to man; it does not originate from him. In order for him to take himself as a subject of inquiry, he will have to think about his own thinking. In this state, man can neither deny nor accept his thinking of himself. In order to do so, he must act in nature in order to put himself before himself. In this sense, self-consciousness, in continuous unfolding, cannot reach its final destination of dematerialisation.

This may explain early modernist painters’ uncertainty about their most basic and subjective means for painting – seeing. The painter paints, and examines what she has done. This is her painterly way of self-consciousness. Uncertainty means one is thinking. Uncertainty persists, and the intention continuously unfolds.

8. Epilogue: Suspended Subjectivity

It is well known that Cage was much influenced by Zen Buddhism, and his idea of nothing comes from it. Barthes was also interested in Zen Buddhism, as shown in his book *Empire of Signs (L'Empire des Signes, 1970)* and *The Neutral (2005)*. His idea of the neutral is in harmony with East Asian ideas of Zen, Tao or Buddhism, and his love for koans and haiku is closely associated with their power to “suspend language” (1970b, p. 72). Also, Eco vaguely indicates the teaching method of koans with the intentional openness of open work. But their theories did not work. It was a mal-application of a foreign culture via idolisation. We cannot know how the tradition of East Asian painting might have developed on its own, since it never survived through modernist times. What we now see are fossilized remains of dead tradition, which are revived and even glorified from time to time by foreigners looking to escape from their own culture and tradition, e.g. Cage and Barthes. Culture moves around like water or the air. To make it one's own, it needs to be adapted by digestion. It has to be part of one's system and become part of one's nature. Zen Buddhism is particular to Japanese culture. It is in the natural landscape of their culture. It cannot be simply taken and applied to a foreign body without the proper grounding to digest it into one's own. Yet, this is the very reason that we may be able to adapt and reinvigorate traditions of others on our own terms and use them for reflecting on our individual traditions, which form the habitual basis of our standpoints.

The openness of Eco's open work, i.e. a work of indefinite plural messages without being predetermined, may have been inspired by a Zen Buddhist koan. Koan statements, which are often paradoxical, were used to transcend rational thought, thus to achieve sudden enlightenment (satori) through meditation. Suzuki explains: “Some anecdote of an ancient master, or a dialogue between a master and monks, or a statement or question put forward by a teacher, all of which are used as the means for opening one's mind to the truth of Zen.” Even in this, there is a clear sense of purpose, i.e. enlightenment. It has a finite end. However, this is not a matter of achieving, but a matter of working. After working hard on the koan, enlightenment follows. For this, the teacher does not give a solution, but only the problem for the student to work on. The tacit process of enlightenment is possible because of the tradition built into the practice. Tradition lets one think

one knows when one receives enlightenment without being told. Yet, this contains a loophole. How does one know that what one thinks one knows is actually true? It is the same question for an artist.

As Cézanne says, we see nature and agree about it. We must see nature first, before we come up with man-made projections. We must see and feel it ourselves. This feeling indicates to how we are habitually conditioned to it. We see ourselves react to it in a certain manner. This uncontrolled reaction comprises our real selves slipped past the guard of our conscious controlling. Normative agreement is always in the form of institutions, and this is the status of our current tradition. We present ourselves in the recognised and conformed forms of our social institutions, disregarding what we really are in harmony with our unique and singular lives.

The study of subjectivity which was explored for the short period of time at the beginning of modernism has no place in our current time. The historical self-consciousness was only possible because there was no set of given directions. It was the time of ground zero, and the artists had to start from scratch by asking themselves the most fundamental questions, i.e. the meaning of their seeing.

We are made of flesh which allows what we call rational mind. We think, not because we want to, but because we are made that way. We cannot stop thinking, even if we want to. And this is the proof. Our thinking is always part of our nature, and needs to be questioned as part of self-consciousness. The early modernists, i.e. Cézanne and Matisse, proved it with their insatiable doubt of their own knowledge of their intuitive perception.

The artist's need of recognition and the audience's demand for a clear intention give us a partial picture of what Pippin calls "bourgeois subjectivity", which is unique to the modern western structure of life, and is now common to most of us. We have to rely on others for what we know of ourselves. Contemporary artists are not exempt.

As Eco and Pippin explain, modern art is differentiated from traditional art because of its mode of reception – we look for meaning and intention in art rather than beauty or truth. This western model of modern art is standardised as an

institution in which artists are encouraged and forced to be clear about their intentions. The problem of intention still persists. This is Matisse's verdict on his feeling:

"I feel very strongly the tie between my earlier and my recent works, but I do not think exactly the way I thought yesterday. Or rather, my basic idea has not changed, but my thought has evolved, and my modes of expression have followed my thoughts. I do not repudiate any of my paintings but there is not one of them that I would not redo differently, if I had it to redo. My destination is always the same but I work out a different route to get there" (1978, p. 35).

There is no sudden change at the hinge of seeing and knowing, but only slow distillation from seeing to knowing (like squinting the eyes of mind to see more clearly). This moment of "squinting" is the artist's self-consciousness at work. Self-consciousness itself is empty, and the emptiness is imperative for the artist to see herself as she is. The artist discovers herself in the state of uncertainty.

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