

The Art Of Not Dying From The Truth

By Iva Troi Zlateva

A PhD DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Art And Humanities at
Selinus University

Faculty of Arts And Humanities in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Art History

January, 2022

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Abstract	4
Acknowledgements	4
Chapter 1. The Philosophical Landscape - Red Flags	5
1.1 Schrödinger's Art	6
1.2 The Loss Of The Real	12
Chapter 2. Repeat and Reshuffle	20
Chapter 3. The Rights To Subjectivity	21
3.1 Partial Subjectivity	21
3.2 The Others	25
Chapter 4. The Exchange	29
4.1 His Art Or His Ear	29
4.2 Caravaggio The Criminal	33
4.3 Artemisia The Raped	40
4.4 Renoir "Sucks At Painting"	45
4.5 Picasso's Failure	50
Chapter 5: History - The Untrustworthy Judge	58
5.1 Artist Versus Oeuvre	62
5.2 Who Is To Blame?	64
Chapter 6: The Genius Problem	68
6.1 The Man - The Myth	68
6.2 Open To Exploitation	76
Chapter 7: Failure	79
7.1 Understanding Failure	79
7.2 Failing In Public	82
Chapter 8: Saving Art	87
8.1: Aesthetics - Enemy Of Art?	88
8.2: Scenius And The Return To The Real	94
Conclusion	97

The Art Of Not Dying From The Truth

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Art and Failure. It also aims to reverse the fallacious logic that famed artists only fail in life and not art, and proposes that understanding artistic failure can contribute in a significant way to our understanding of art and its place in today's society.

It is my understanding that art historians' unwillingness to acknowledge the role of artistic failure in developing the skills and ideology necessary for any individual to become an accomplished artist has led to the field's preoccupation with personal failure: Van Gogh and Goya are mad, Caravaggio is a murderer and a troubled soul, Artemisia Gentileschi is a victim, and so on. Ignoring artistic failure as an integral part of the act of artistic discovery, together with other variables such as the innate failure of female artists that came with Modernity, created a vacuum that has been exploited by market forces at the expense of artists, art lovers and students of the arts since the beginning of the 1900s. For centuries, we have been trained to judge the artist rather than the art and blinded to the absurdity of accepting that everything a famed artist creates is of high artistic value. Art History and the artworld has made us enablers — involuntary instruments in the justification of unjustifiable market terms and conditions.

Acknowledgements

“For indeed, a man who aspires to rise above the mediocre, to be something more than ordinary, surely deserves admiration, even if in the end he fails and loses a fortune on account of his ambitions.”

— Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World*

Part of me wanted to dedicate this book to the man who remained a child forever. Because losing my little brother in a particularly violent way robbed me of my identity throughout my teenage years as I became "the sister of that boy". I did realise later in life that it was rather a replacement in the sense that I was gifted with just the right amount of magical thinking to fuel the rise above mediocrity Kazuo Ishiguro so passionately writes about. Whatever foolish mess I got myself into, it was my late brother who kept me sane and gave my identity purpose. Communism, Cold War, poverty, walls, glass ceilings, misogyny, really poor taste in men, crossing borders that shouldn't be crossed and burning bridges underneath my very feet, it all became manageable because Grief somehow made the seemingly impossible unavoidable.

And yet, this book is dedicated to someone else - my father. Why? Because that very grief that gave my life purpose also broke him. And after he was broken, he rose up, picked up the pieces and made me an artist. He tossed and turned in his bed every night throughout my teenage years, trying to figure out how to buy me art materials, pay for tutors, keep me from being raped on my way to art school (because, let's face it, where I grew up, the risk of that happening was 50/50).

When money became too much of an issue, my father - the winemaker, botanist, inventor and engineer, signed up for employment as a maintenance technician at the uranium mining plant in the outskirts of our hometown. Nothing I said or did could possibly stop him. From this day on, my father lived through me. Every one of my achievements, however insignificant, was celebrated.

Years of working in toxic environments, a damaged heart and a number of near death experiences later, he saw me grow up into a person 'so much bigger than anything and anyone he had ever known" (his words not mine). And It's with pride that I think of myself, at least partially, as his creation. It is because of his sacrifice that I never suffer from creative blocks or lack of discipline.

This book is for him.

Chapter 1. The Philosophical Landscape - Red Flags

Needless to say, my father did not quite manage to keep me safe from predators simply because he was vastly outnumbered. My hometown's so called *Intelligencia*¹ was riddled with them and the visual arts fraction was, of course, exclusively male and the absolute worst. And it didn't help that, in my utter naiveté, I decided that these often obese and always bearded men somehow owned the precious answer to the riddle that is ART and much like some kind of magic potion, that answer will be the key to all the doors.

Three and a half decades and several creative careers later, I can assure you that they did not possess any answers, keys or magic potions, and there was no wisdom in their beards. Much like the figures in Michail Bulgakov's infamous literally masterpiece *The Master And Margarita*², they were puppets trapped in the grey misty realm of Socialist Realism - the totalitarian regime's favourite genre. And guess what, when a man became a soldier in the army of Intelligentsia, artistic failure was left at the door. Being part of the elite, or "communist aristocracy" as they were often called, meant one was finally "an artist" thus immune to any kind of failure, artistic or otherwise. And unless one did one's actual job as an artist and broke the rules set upon all but a few selected mortals by the censorship apparatus, one remained immune to failure of all kinds.

The younger me was always puzzled about this incredible vanishing trick. Where did artistic failure go and why were all famed artists "immune" to it when I myself was failing continuously while learning how to draw, paint, print and, most importantly, see art?

Another puzzle that had me tossing and turning in my bed throughout art school was: Why is everyone so "faulty"? My own life was full with obstacles, from growing up poor because my oncologist mother insisted on working a minimum-wage job at the local hospital stating that "poor people need cancer care too", to becoming a mother at the age of eighteen and single mother by the age of twenty two, having to study and work at the same time until I had a fine art degree became an impossibility. It was tough for me but nowhere near as tough as the frantic madness-riddled lives of every artist throughout art history it seemed. Was madness a side effect of my chosen profession or was it a requirement? Did I have to live on the streets like Caravaggio³, cut

¹ *Intelligentsia* noun – a status class of educated people engaged in the complex mental labours that critique, guide, and lead in shaping the culture and politics of their society. "Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes". Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

² *Master and Margarita* (Russian: Мастер и Маргарита) – a novel by Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, written in the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1940 during Stalin's regime.

³ Caravaggio spent most of his life living on the street or temporarily with friends or patrons. Graham-Dixon, *A Life Sacred and Profane*, 2011, Penguin Books.

my ear off like Van Gogh⁴, sue my rapist like Gentileschi⁵ or live in a mental institution like Kusama⁶ in order to make it in the artworld? Being bisexual could have been something to claim as a differential merit during my years of identity crisis hasn't it seemed widely irrelevant and a tad too late for a child of the 90s. As a young mother responsible for many more things than "just myself", I had no desire to do any of these things, I just wanted to paint and not starve.

1.1 Schrödinger's Art⁷

Before I succumb to the temptation to apologise for the unforgivable cliché in the subtitle above, I need to clarify a number of things. First of all, despite having a degree in Philosophy and being able to read philosophical texts while understanding at least some of it, I do not regard myself as a philosopher nor is my ambition to be one. Secondly, although my field of study is currently Art History, I am not a historian nor is my ambition to be one. My knowledge of history and art history has a lot to do with the need to understand my own place in society so I can do my work as an artist, it does not make me an expert in any way. I do, however, read a lot of historical texts.

That said, in the writing of this thesis, a certain level of understanding of both Philosophy and Art History was required mainly because, without it, I would not be able to draw any conclusions based on a theory that relies heavily on discourse analysis. In this book, Art History is defined as a discourse based on my new understanding of it, drawn from the work of Michael Foucault⁸, and not as a given to be studied. My intention was, and is, to treat Art History as knowledge that in combination with social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations, constitutes a discourse and not as the body of "factual" data art historians intended it to be.

And as to this subchapter's title, I should be allowed at least one low-hanging fruit, should I not?

Throughout the course of planning and researching this paper, alongside with exploring the chain of events that led me to reach the conclusions outlined in my initial statement, I kept asking myself a seemingly unanswerable question: *How come my understanding of what I am supposed to do as an artist, my purpose in life and the arts if you wish, feel so inadequate to the principles of the so called artworld? Our understanding of art and artists seems to have been crushed completely and nothing makes any sense. The traditional idea of the artist as the truth-teller is idealistic at best. At the same time, there is the seemingly undying myth of the "tortured soul" fuelled by the creative industry's addiction to the exploitation of artists and makers⁹. And when it comes to Contemporary Art, the lines are blurry at best. The common belief seems to be that whatever hangs on the wall of a gallery or a museum must be Art because someone said so and because of where it is, no questions asked.*

⁴ Van Gogh famously cut his ear off, allegedly as a romantic gesture. Naifeh and White-Smith, Van Gogh: The Life. 1994 Profile Books.

⁵ Artemisia Gentileschi was raped at 15. Because a woman couldn't bring rape charges at the time, her father, the noted painter Orazio Gentileschi, filed the lawsuit. It was considered a crime of property damage; Artemisia had lost "bartering value." McCullough, Blood Water Paint, 2018, Barnes & Noble. Yayoi Kusama lives at a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo that has been her home since 1977. Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama. 2003 Kusama.

⁶ Yayoi Kusama lives at a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo that has been her home since 1977. Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama. 2003 Kusama.

⁷ Referring to Schrodinger's Cat - thought experiment in the field of quantum mechanics where a cat placed in a box with radioactive material can be seen as simultaneously alive and dead.

⁸ Schneck, Stephen Frederick. Michel Foucault on power/discourse, theory and practice. Human Studies, 1987.

⁹ Source: IPSE Survey 2019

With every new thread I examined during my initial research, I stumbled upon clues that led to different sub-theories on the matter, one more ill-defined than the other. Fearing confusion more than subjective interpretation, I decided to succumb to human nature and venture back to what I already knew.

The narrative of art history has always been construed as a sequence of successes. But throughout our civilisation, Art has attempted to overcome Beauty, and since the beginning of Modernity, overcoming and even reinventing Beauty seems to have become art's main purpose. But what do these attempts signify other than the increasing alienation of what Art is supposed to do and originally did for us humans — revealing the ultimate nature of the World by sensuously showing us the Truth? And is it not that the artistic practice itself constitutes a series of failures? Is it not the only way to learn?

While establishing my own readiness to accomplish the task of writing a thesis helped to clarify what research methodology to use and where to look for clues, what I thought I already knew was of little value as none of these initial statements could be objectively proven without reviewing hundreds of years worth of literature. It was at that point that I realised that my best course of action would be to start at the end and open the philosophical can of worms that is art's alleged failure, or rather channel the thoughts of the man many believe to have proclaimed art dead, declared its development over, and its importance buried — Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Hegel's philosophy organised art history in a strictly linear and hierarchical fashion. He outlined the growth of the Geist (literally meaning "spirit," Geist was conceived of as the ethos—spirit, ghost, or collective consciousness—of a culture) through philosophical stages of artistic production¹⁰. In his "The Phenomenology of Spirit", the Weltgeist ("world spirit") is not an actual object or a transcendental Godlike thing, but "a means of philosophising about history"¹¹.

Even during Hegel's own time, 1770–1831, art had already become dependent on mediated intellectual concepts in conveying its meaning. An artistic creation could no longer be understood based purely on its sensible appearance, one had to be guided towards some kind of conceptual meaning in order to "comprehend" art. Grasping the meaning of a Renaissance Masterpiece or the music of Mozart in a merely sensuous presentation devoid of words and concept, became insufficient.

Looking at the way we relate to art today, one may observe that very few of us listen to pure music, i.e. music without words that is purely instrumental. Such music is ambiguous, it lacks preciseness even in its moments of clarity. Our desire to fill the void of precise meaning that only words can provide, has become overpowering. Dance is almost always performed as backdrop to a lyrical song and rarely for its own sake. As Hegel states:

"We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the Spirit. No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God the Father, Christ, and Mary estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is of no help; we bow the knee no longer before these artistic portrayals."¹²

The poets and artists became for the Ancient Greeks the creators of their gods. These artists gave the Greek nation a definite idea of the behaviour, life, and effectiveness of the Divine, or, in other

¹⁰ Encyclopedia, 1817, Spirit

¹¹ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, p.97, 1770-1831

¹² Kottman, Paul A. "Hegel and Shakespeare on the Pastness of Art." *The Art of Hegel's Aesthetics. Hegelian Philosophy and the Perspectives of Art History* (2018): 263-301

words, “the definite content of religion”¹³. General religious propositions and categories of thought were not there to begin with. When these religious propositions were later clothed in imagery by artists and given an external embellishment by poets, the mode of artistic production was such that “what fermented in these poets they could work out only in this form of art and poetry”.

“This is the original true standing of art as the first and immediate satisfaction of Absolute Spirit”, Hegel concludes. But with the Christian era, it all changed. The concept of God could no longer be grasped sensually, God no longer had a possible image or sound, nor was the world of intuitive emotion really captured in painting. Finally, no work of art could truly capture the full reality of freedom. In other words, art could no longer provide the mirror of our own reality and was thus no longer sufficient in fulfilling our needs for self-comprehension. The Spirit did not need art anymore.

“But just as art has its “before” in nature and the finite spheres of life, so too it has an “after”, i.e. a region which in turn transcends art's way of apprehending and representing the Absolute. For art has still a limit in itself and therefore passes over into higher forms of consciousness. This limitation determines, after all, the position which we are accustomed to assign to art in our contemporary life. For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself.”¹⁴

As Hegel explained, before Christianity, it was art which “set truth before our minds in the mode of sensuous configuration”. This sensuous configuration had in its appearance a deeper meaning, but it was in the unity of the Concept with the individual appearance where we found the essence of the Beautiful.

The next sphere which transcends the realm of art, would thus be Religion. Religion has pictorial thinking as its form of consciousness, for the Absolute has been removed from the objectivity of art into the inwardness of the subject. In other words, for the religious consciousness, art is only one aspect and not the absolute truth.

The final third form of Absolute Spirit is Philosophy — “the mechanism by which Absolute Spirit achieves self-consciousness”. Hegel argues that Philosophy, as it stands then and now, is intimately connected with all its past phases. But this becomes problematic for him. How can eternal truth emerge in a subject like Philosophy if Philosophy as such changes over time? The solution Hegel came up with was that Spirit's self-knowledge can be seen as emerging in stages over time in different people, and, thus, Spirit can be seen as developing to perfection as the history of Philosophy progresses. The issue throughout is how various philosophers addressed two concepts that are in dualistic tension with each other: the tangible realm of physical things against the intangible realm of thought. It is only in its final stage with Schelling and Hegel himself that the two notions are identified with each other. That is all according to the man himself.

Numerous scholars have discussed the “death of art” in support of the Hegelian view. Some, such as Arthur Danto, have refined it. According to Danto, art is really over with, having actually become “transmuted into philosophy”¹⁵ rather than being part of it. In “Why does art need to be explained?”¹⁶ Danto reflects on society's higher principle of self-determination and

¹³ Hegel, Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics. Volume 1. Part I The Idea of Artistic Beauty, Or The Ideal

¹⁴ Hegel, Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics. Volume 1. Part I The Idea of Artistic Beauty, Or The Ideal

¹⁵ Arthur Danto, The End of Art, in The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 86.

¹⁶ Danto, Arthur C. Why does art need to be explained? Hegel, Biedermeier and the intractably avant-garde. In: Weintraub, Linda et al. (Ed.). Art on the edge and over: searching for art's meaning in contemporary society, New York: Art Insights, 1996.

comprehension found in religion as a representation of picture-thinking and philosophy as conceptual cognition. It is not about what our view of the world is but how we comprehend our world. Is it through scientific thinking where we are no longer an obedient mass following the principles set by external forces? Or is our comprehension of the world based on a framework of belief in divine providence? Or can it be that these frameworks coexist?

Whatever the answer to all these questions may be, there is no society on earth where the generally accepted highest meaning of reality is aesthetic. The only recent example is possibly the Nazis and their society of *Übermenschen* based entirely on the Nazi party's personal aesthetic vision as a framework of belief.

This said, one wonders if accepting such a simplified view of Hegel's work may be a trap. For one, there seem to be pockets within Contemporary Art where Absolute Truth still seems to reside as artists themselves assign a spiritual truth-telling purpose to their own existence in the world. The Hegelian view also begs the question: "Now what?" If these men were right and Art is indeed dead, done with and buried, then what happens next?

Secondly, Hegel never meant to say that art was going to die and become a non-thing. What he meant to say was that the Spirit did not need art to convey truth anymore. The Spirit became independent of it, so to speak. So, it seems logical to conclude that it is up to art to "reinvent" itself.

But let us assume for a moment that this simplified Hegelian view applies and art, being no longer the mirror of absolute truth, has indeed failed. What does that mean for us artists? Are we obsolete? And what of art History? If art died then its history would be in a world of trouble, right?

In *Philosophy and Failure*¹⁷ Desmond reflects on the "the ultimacy of failure", the experience of failure as a negativity "on which instrumental mind breaks". The massive concern, Desmond claims, is that history seems to have a problem with finitude and that is "a clear indication of the fermenting of failure in contemporary thought" (1998:288-289). The blame for this failure of the ethical falls on the failure of utilitarianism to answer the issues of modernity. He continues the thread by arguing that looking at religion and the religious, the "death of God is the scandalous sign blazing over the entrance to ultimate metaphysical failure" (1998:289).

'Salvation in Christian theology offers a religious answer to our suffering of ultimate failure, interpreted as a sinful-ness, or radical disability of the ethical will, that human beings themselves cannot redeem.'

Desmond sees the Hegelian "death of art" as the epitomisation of this sense of failure with respect to being aesthetic. Philosophy has always been concerned with the possible failure of the active reason pervading and animating the Universe — the logos. It is his understanding that while Existentialist absurdism passes into what it hopes is "the Holy of Holies", only to find the sanctuary "empty", Nietzschean nihilism celebrates the inescapability of failure in "trying to be strong". But this absurd celebration, Desmond states, cannot escape the fact that it is "little more than metaphysical". And the existential bravado doesn't stop there as the post-Heideggerian philosopher (or "the new high priest of exotic textual carding" as he calls him) takes up residence in the sanctuary of failure. But he does not live Nietzsche's strong nihilism, instead he parodies it, he puts it on paper, not into life, meaning "The text is failure, failure is in the text". So, according to the post-Heideggerian philosophers, it is not people that fail but art. If that is so then how come art history only sees people as failures?

¹⁷ Desmond, William, *Philosophy and Failure*, The Journal of Speculative Philosophy Vol. II, No. 4, 1988 Pennsylvania State University Press, London.

Reading Desmond's paper triggered my interest in the Heideggerian view. After reviewing what materials I had gathered, I not only agreed with Desmond but also added Heidegger to my list of possible philosophers to research on a deeper level, one reason being his association with the Nazi regime as the most recent example of a society's frame of belief purely based on aesthetics.

In the abstract of *The post-Heideggerian Age*¹⁸, Lebovic writes:

"What is it in the drama of Heidegger's existential query that keeps us so busy, nearly a century since its introduction into the philosophical discourse? Is it its darkness? Or is it the absolute demand for a dangerous "opening to the world" while shutting down any possibility for self-disclosure? Or maybe, just maybe, it is Heidegger's critical self-reflection, a stance as remarkable as his refusal to take responsibility and practice self-restraint when considering his own biased views and complacency with the Nazi regime?"

As explained by Idhe in *Deromanticizing Heidegger*¹⁹ Heidegger's view on the Greek temple against the ground of its earth is "typical Heidegger". It is "heavy" but also "romantic"; it is "what gathers the mortals, gods, earth, and sky." He states: "The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground... The temple in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves."²⁰

Idhe looks at this example of Heidegger's analysis of art objects because it is relatively well-known and frequently quoted. From analysing the patterns present in this and other examples, Idhe draws the conclusion that, according to Heidegger, an art object is the primary example of "good" technology. Both art objects and technological objects are "thingly" and "produced", have ways of "revealing a world", and belong in some way to the process called *techne*, which Heidegger defines as "the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful".

The by Heidegger suggested solution to the dilemmas of the *Age of Technology* seem to evolve around a kind of saving power found in art. Here Idhe asks if the revealing power that "could save us from the reductions of modern technology" is because art and technology are closely related in precisely the *thingly* (as in "produced"). Not only that, but these revealing roles, which both art and technological objects contain, are seen as focal elements against a context or field that is "lighted up" as a "world".

In suggesting a solution to said dilemmas, Heidegger makes an interesting distinction between "good" and "bad" technologies but it is not entirely clear what that distinction consists of. Idhe suggests that one such distinction may lie in a preference for what he calls "embodiment relations". Heidegger prefers those technologies that express straightforward bodily, perceptual relations with the environment. "Human beings "act" through the hand; for the hand is, like the word, a distinguishing characteristic of humans. Only a being, such as the human, that "has" the word (mythos, logos) can and must have "hands"." For Heidegger there seems to be less "hand" in writing with a typewriter than presumably that which is "handwritten" with a pen. In a way, this distinction between "good" and "bad" technologies is just another example of "exotic textual carding" meaning that when the divine is channeled by the artist, the more "things" you put in its path the less "direct" it becomes.

¹⁸ Lebovic, N. *The post-Heideggerian Age*. *Modern Intellectual History*, 14(3), 899-911, 2017.

¹⁹ Idhe, Don, *Deromanticizing Heidegger*, Fordham University Press: 2016

²⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *The origin of the work of art*. 1935

What becomes obvious in this very short review of texts discussing the Heideggerian view is that Geist in its original form is in a way brought back to life as a solution to what Hegel claims is the "death of art", which in a lot of ways also explains Heidegger's relationship with the Nazi party. Bringing back the divine in aesthetics places the Nazi ideology in its intended context — the realm of the divine.

Now back to Desmond and understanding failure. In order to understand failure, "one needs to understand success", he states. In the context of this thesis, understanding success may not be an easy thing to accomplish as there is hardly any consensus on what it means to be a successful artist, which is why I have used the term "famed" rather than "successful". As Desmond notes, one might, for example, count economic success as spiritual failure (2016:291). In today's artworld, successful artists are those whose work is sold for millions. So, if that may somehow equal spiritual failure then what is success exactly?

Maybe the clues lie in Nietzsche's view of us humans. He referred to man as "the unfinished animal" and he was right to do so as we are born incomplete and it is our nature to strive. That striving gives us joy as we participate in the expansion of the self. "To strive is to envisage a desired goal and to stretch the self to it." Transcending our limitations, we become concentrated in our endeavors and channel our energies towards the end we elect. If we attain the end, our venture is crowned with success." So what is success if not the purposeful meaning to our desires and acts?

"Success is not simple. It conjures up the sense of satisfaction, but in this much suffering and struggle may be submerged. Success is an end, not a beginning; it comes to crown long effort. Out of strife striving grows; success often is conquered strife. Success is something won, often in wrestling with a resistance." (2016:291)

In an attempt to connect the above definition of success with the Hegelian view of art's failure, I ended up thinking that if the purpose of art is to be the absolute truth-teller holding a mirror to humanity then there can be no future success for art as a whole unless this purpose is somehow regained or transformed to serve an equally grand cause.

There is a quote that keeps emerging in my thoughts every time I think of art in the context of art studies. Reflecting upon publicly-funded art schools, art historian Norbert Lynton said that "the existence of any sort of publicly-funded art education is a very remarkable thing... it proves the survival of superstition that came with industrialisation, a desire for some sort of insurance policy against the end of civilisation."²¹

Maybe I am remembering this quote so vividly and frequently because it makes me hopeful. Despite Lynton's seemingly disregarding attitude towards publicly funding the arts, he seems to acknowledge that many consider the possibility of art holding a certain key to civilization's survival. Or maybe not art in itself but humans' need for it. It makes me think that art will never really be dead unless we are. After all, that same Nietzsche who warned of the dangers of nihilism, the death of art being one of them, was also the one who famously stated that "We have art in order not to die from the truth." This said, it still may be the case that art is failing.

Question is, dead or alive, will we be able to stop art from being extinct?

²¹ Quinn, Malcolm, *Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Routledge: 2016

1.2 The Loss Of The Real

Every time I attempt to untangle a chain of thought related to the fuzzy realm of the meaning of art, I am reminded of T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death*, in which Clark writes (after Paul Valéry), that "a work of art is defined by the fact that it does not exhaust itself," that "art-ness is the capacity to invite repeated response" (2006:115).²²

Even if we accept the somewhat simplified view of art's failure and death (courtesy of Hegel's contemporaries rather than Hegel himself), we cannot deny that art exists and has consequences. It makes us feel, or feel differently, but it also makes us think, and think again. "It is in a certain sense irrefutable"²³.

This state of "art-ness" that Clark and Valéry refer to, is indeed intriguing. The notion of art having this capacity for continuously replenishing its meaning appeals to me. How can something that behaves like that be dead? Virginia Woolf called it *fertility*. "The creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders"²⁴, she said, concluding "...and we have need of that fertility" (2009:777).

We do indeed. So art does matter after all. Or does it? Or maybe a more relevant question would be: *Does art matter still?*

Jean Baudrillard²⁵ and others have characterised postmodernity (i.e. our time) as a nihilistic epoch or mode of thought. While few philosophers would claim to be nihilists²⁶ Nietzsche is the philosopher mostly associated with nihilism. He argued that its corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and also give rise to the greatest crisis in human history. Nihilism and its themes such as epistemological failure, destruction of all values, and cosmic purposelessness, have preoccupied artists, social critics, and philosophers for more than a century now. By the end of the twentieth century, existential despair as a response to nihilism caused a wide-spread attitude of indifference among scholars that still echoes in the corridors of academia. And exactly as Nietzsche predicted, nihilism's impact on the culture and values of the last century has been felt, with all its apocalyptic doom and gloom and an unhealthy dose of societal anxiety and rage. In a lot of ways, Nietzsche's predictions about the epoch of postmodernity were astonishingly accurate. This said, it is important to mention another, often forgotten belief of his - that despite the corrosive effects of nihilism, we will eventually work through it. This belief was based on the assumption that if we survived this horrific (but maybe also cathartic) process of destroying all interpretations of the world, we could then perhaps discover the correct course for humankind.

Listening to recordings of Baudrillard's live conversations on postmodernism, one quickly realises that he is agreeing with Nietzsche to a point. To the question "What's left once you've liquidated that overload of meaning?" Baudrillard answers (with "giddiness" as he puts it), "What remains is a good deal less than one would like to admit. Every system of value—in terms of energy, for example—seems to be crumbling down."

²² Clark, Timothy J., *The sight of death: An experiment in art writing*. Yale University Press, 2006.

²³ Danchev, Lisle. Introduction: art, politics, purpose, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 2009.

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography", in *Collected Essays*, London: Hogarth vol. IV, 1967 in Danchev, Lisle. Introduction: art, politics, purpose, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 2009.

²⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. *Game with Vestiges*. In *Baudrillard Live*, edited by M. Gane, 1993. Also, Baudrillard, Jean. *On Nihilism*. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by S. F. Glasser. 1994.

²⁶ Vattimo, Gianni. *The end of modernity: Nihilism and hermeneutics in postmodern culture*. 1988.

On the topic of Freud and sexuality, he exclaims: 'sexuality has gone weightless. It is now reaching the state of "obscenity", but everyone conspires to mask its disappearance by setting up trompe-l'oeil stage décor. I couldn't care less about desire. I neither want to abolish it nor to take it into consideration. I wouldn't know where to put it any more' (2003, p.102).

Baudrillard then continues to denounce desire altogether: "What bothers me about desire is the idea of an energy at the source of all these fluxes. Is desire really involved? In my opinion, it has nothing to do with it."

But why am I discussing this and what does it have to do with the conundrum of art's *raison d'être*?

In the beginning of this chapter, the term art-ness and a certain assumed aspect of it — fertility — were introduced by one of the most important modernist 20th century authors - Virginia Woolf. Add Baudrillard's theory that postmodernism is a nihilistic epoch and you end up with a very interesting situation. If the subject has lost its meaning, then so has art, sexuality, desire and all the things. At the same time, quite a number of our contemporary thinkers, but also thinkers of the recent and not so recent past, seem to think that desire is what fuels art, makes it fertile and gives it that special kind of quality labeled "art-ness".

When Baudrillard starts discussing desire, he gets "bothered by desire as the idea of an energy at the source of all these fluxes" and denounces it altogether. At the same time, just like Nietzsche, Baudrillard also recognises that the nihilistic mode of thought does not mean that we are "left with nothing".

"This is the well-known "crisis of representation"²⁷. But just because this system of values is coming apart—the system which also supported the political and theatrical scenes—that doesn't mean we are being left in a complete void. On the contrary, we are confronted with a more radical situation... It is true that logic only leads to disenchantment. We can't avoid going a long way with negativity, with nihilism and all. But then don't you think a more exciting world opens up? Not a more reassuring world, but certainly more thrilling, a world where the name of the game remains secret. A world ruled by reversibility and indetermination..." (1993:100)²⁸

When talking about disenchantment versus enchantment, Baudrillard makes an interesting distinction. When there is no mediation, i.e. things make events by themselves, by a sort of instant commutation, it is no longer desire but 'seduction'. We are not talking about a metaphor any more but about metamorphosis. Metamorphosis puts an end to the mode of language i.e. the possibility of communicating meaning, which is the metaphor. For Baudrillard, metamorphosis is a "process without Subject, without death, beyond any desire" (1993, p.103).

But with the nihilistic mode of thought and the disappearance of subjectivity, something new takes shape — something "rather paradoxical", Baudrillard claims.

²⁷ In the domains of the arts and of the media, the crisis of representation emerged with the loss of the referent in modern painting and literature and with the ever-increasing distance from the reality of the referential world in the digital and the mass media. In Nöth, Winfried. *Crisis of representation?* 2003.

²⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. *Game with Vestiges*. In *Baudrillard Live*, edited by M. Gane, 1993.

In the decades after World War II, a number of thinkers started to question the validity of the human Subject²⁹. With the rise of phenomenology³⁰ (consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view) came a sociological outlook influenced by the linguistic theory of structuralism (as in pursuing a structural approach to the Subject), and together, these ideas coalesced into postmodernism, which is the ideological outlook Baudrillard discusses in his talks.

Postmodernism gained quite a currency in intellectual life in the 80s and 90s and by the end of the 20th century, the new papal encyclical found John Paul II embracing postmodern despair rather than giving a message of hope.³¹ John Paul II famously stated that "postmodern nihilism has been justified in a sense by the terrible experience of evil which has marked our age", and continued: "... such a dramatic experience has ensured the collapse of rationalist optimism, which viewed history as the triumphant progress of reason, the source of all happiness and freedom". There was Christianity's top Commander In Chief, a.k.a The Pope, warning against "a certain positivist cast of mind" which "continues to nurture the illusion that, thanks to scientific and technical progress, man and woman may live as a demiurge, single-handedly and completely taking charge of their destiny".

It was Lyotard who best summed up the assessment of the modern age³². He said: "I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working Subject, or the creation of wealth".

By rejecting these defining narrative structures of modernity, Lyotard announced the postmodern age. He stated: "I define postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984:xxiii-xxiv). Postmodernism was thus defined as a time when we could do away with the powerful but insignificant ideologies upon which we had relied. As it is the case with so many tall tales, these ideologies were designed to comfort and satisfy the listener. Socialism, the free market, Christianity, the nuclear family, scientific progress were exposed as the tall tales that they really were.

What Baudrillard discusses in his live interview is the fact that this theory called first "post-structuralism" and later "postmodernism" had implications. It was initially blamed for being hostile to subjectivity, but then the opposite appeared to be the case. The postmodernists were first and foremost charged with an excessive subjectivity that "jeopardised objectivity", the hallmark of these new ideas being their scepticism towards a singular objective truth. The charge of relativism was made against postmodernists, or as scientists Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont put it, while explaining the one of the targets of their book *Intellectual impostures*: "A second target of our book is epistemic relativism, that modern science is nothing more than a "myth," a "narration" or a 'social construction.'" ³³

It seemed the Pope might have been right in sounding the alarm. After all, this was an ideological outlook that resisted all authority, and doing so in a riot of subjective preference. According to

²⁹ Vanhoozer, Kevin J. "Theology and the condition of postmodernity: a report on knowledge (of God)." *The Cambridge companion to postmodern theology* 5, 2003

³⁰ Phenomenology - the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

³¹ Heartfield, James. "Postmodernism and the "death of the subject"." Abstracted from *The "Death of the Subject "Explained*, Sheffield Hallam, 2002.

³² Lyotard, Jean-François. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Vol. 10. U of Minnesota Press, 1984

³³ Bricmont, Jean, and Alan Sokal. *Intellectual impostures*. Profile Books, 2011.

their critics, postmodernists deconstructed each and every scientific and moral certainty "in a promiscuous way" as if these were no more than big stories, "meta" and "grand" narratives, as Lyotard stated.

But that was not what postmodernists meant. According to them, metanarratives (meaning narratives about narratives of historical meaning, experience, or knowledge, which offer a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of a master idea) tended to eradicate differences, imposing a lifeless uniformity. Where metanarratives reduced complexity to self-sameness, the method of deconstruction restored the fundamental difference of things. To the rest of the scientist community, such a singular elevation of difference suggested a thoroughgoing subjectivism in which objectivity was sacrificed to personal subjective responses. The very promiscuity of the postmodern deconstruction of all grand narratives meant that the grandest of all narratives, that of the mighty Subject itself, would not remain untouched.

But let us discuss the above mentioned "crisis of representation" for a moment. In the domains of the arts and of the media, this crisis of representation emerged with the loss of the referent in modern painting and literature and with the constantly expanding distance between art and the reality of the referential world in the digital and mass media.

Modern art, dadaism, cubism, and abstract art, are a testament to the loss of the referent in visual and verbal representation. It is, of course "a deliberate renunciation of the referent owing to the radical shift of focus from the referent to the sign vehicle"³⁴. Simply put, what a word or phrase denotes or stands for has been replaced with the actual word and nothing more. As a result, we can conclude that representation is no longer possible in twentieth-century art (cf. Scheerer et al. 1992: 852). It was Foucault (1970 [1966]: 306–307) who diagnosed the crisis of representation in literature, in the works of Mallarmé specifically, as a "fragmentation of language" due to the fact that "language, having been detached from representation, the being of language itself had become, as it were, fragmented", which resulted in the "disappearance of discourse".

In Baudrillard's words: "It is the loss of the real, the absolute distance of the real. One can no longer touch things." At this point in the conversation, a conclusion is reached: "The only form of the real that remains, as I see it, is a shifting between things. Otherwise you are paralyzed—or vaporised. Paralysis is the panicky plea for identity. It's neurosis..." and "...in places like New York people can remain in a kind of positive, happy fluidity, a state of trans-paring. But most people experience it as a kind of liquid terror."

Before I go farther, I want to pause and comment on a common misunderstanding concerning Nietzsche and nihilism (even if it is just a petty attempt at a cliffhanger in this temporarily philosophical context). Nietzsche has been, mostly by those who disagree with his "death of God" ideas, awarded the title "champion" of the nihilistic mode of thought. This cannot be more wrong, Donald Trump may be a nihilist with his "reality has no meaning" and "everything is rigged to fail" ideas, but Nietzsche is not. He regarded nihilism as a problem, and a very troubling problem at that, and there is growing consensus in the anglophone secondary literature that nihilism, and the vast problems associated with it, is one of his main philosophical concerns.

While reading Andrew Huddleston's thoughts on Nietzsche's concerns with nihilism (2019)³⁵ it occurred to me that Nietzsche himself, Hegel, Heidegger, Baudrillard, and many more, seem to be in agreement regarding Christianity and the impact it has had on every possible discourse associated with modern and postmodern thought. If one dares to simplify drastically just for the sake of contrast, one might even say that Christianity is directly to blame for the death of God and art alike.

³⁴ Nöth, Winfried. Crisis of representation?. 2003.

³⁵ Huddleston, Andrew. Nietzsche on Nihilism: a unifying thread. 2019.

"Nihilists, antecedently, might seem to be those who, in the wake of God's death, have lost their sense that anything matters and fallen into existential despair. But for Nietzsche, Christianity itself is also a thoroughly nihilistic outlook. So one manifestation of nihilism is to see the world as bereft of God and accordingly meaningless." (2019:2)

It is clear that when it comes to the crisis of representation, Christianity had a causal effect and Hegel was apparently not the only one who thought so.

Germany celebrated the 250th anniversary of Hegel's birthday in 2020. This anniversary has given many a seemingly welcome excuse to revisit Hegel's philosophical theories and reevaluate his achievements.

Sebastian Ostritsch, an academic at Stuttgart University and author of *Hegel: The World Philosopher*³⁶, said in an interview recently that during his research he was 'surprised and pleased' to learn that Hegel had "a very meandering, non-linear CV". He explains: "while his philosopher friend Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, a student flatmate along with the poet Hölderlin, was made a professor aged 23, Hegel didn't get a full professorship until his mid-40s". At some point he even accepted an academic post in Heidelberg after "his short digression into journalism". This short digression happened at Bamberg, where Hegel became an editor of a local newspaper. During this 'spell as a hack', Hegel wrote a short unpublished essay that, according to Ostritsch, "not only defied his reputation for long-windedness but tackled a common complaint about his philosophy", famously stating that the "uneducated, not the educated" are the ones who think abstractly.³⁷

"One common prejudice is that Hegel is an abstract philosopher. In fact he is the opposite: a philosopher who does not try to put ideas or people into boxes [...] In our age, stereotypical thinking and partisan arguments rule supreme. Hegel would have dismissed this as bad abstract thinking."

Hegel viewed history as a realm of the non-linear but also a realm of inevitable progress. This view was later, for better or worse, adopted by Karl Marx, which unfortunately led to Hegel being mistakenly labeled as a protosocialist. Hegel's ideas about the individual and the state were thus perceived by some as the seeds of twentieth-century totalitarianism and its darkest chapters.

This perception of Hegel's ideas being in the root of twentieth-century totalitarianism, Ostritsch explains, has led to quite a few contemporary German politicians evoking Hegel's notion of the *weltgeist* – an invisible force advancing world history – with "the gusto of the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who wrote a university dissertation on the philosopher". Someone like Angela Merkel, on the contrary, "is more likely to quote Karl Popper, a noted anti-Hegelian".

Later in the Guardian interview I am referencing here, we read the words of another philosopher and author of a Hegel biography *Hegel: Philosopher of Freedom*, Klaus Vieweg who states "It's all a "disastrous" misunderstanding caused by numerous misreadings. Hegel was neither a covert revolutionary nor a champion of state control but a political moderate whose balancing of economic and social concerns was never more relevant than in pandemic times."

According to Klaus Vieweg, Hegel sketched out a counter-vision to rapacious Wall Street capitalism that remains highly relevant: "He believed in the market as an indispensable basis for our society, but that the dominant principles of a modern state needed to be something else: freedom, justice and sustainability". Further ahead, Vieweg states that he sees Hegel as "an

³⁶ Michelet, Karl Ludwig. Hegel, der unwiderlegte Weltphilosoph: eine Jubelschrift. Duncker & Humblot, 1870.

³⁷ Philip Oltermann, The Guardian. accessed on August 27th 2020. Internet Source. (url: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/27/germany-finds-it-hard-to-love-hegel-250-years-after-his-birth>)

optimist, but never a wide-eyed optimist" who was convinced that the idea of freedom could be put into people's heads, but he never believed that would inevitably lead to a freer society.

The article also quotes Rosenfelder who writes. "The present age looks like an open war between reason and reality. In the Hegelian year of 2020, this contrast is brought into sharper relief with every argument on Twitter, every pandemic wave, every autocrat's election campaign. The world is slowly going mad, and we can only watch from the sidelines."

The conclusion that Hegel not only presents the problem but can also provide a solution becomes evident at the end. "In times of conspiracy theories and filter bubbles, Hegel's method of thinking – dialectics – can become a kind of intellectual self-help" because, in the words of Jürgen Kaube, "Thinking is effective".

One of the reasons I found this article particularly interesting is that despite this being a text about a philosopher, the author aims at painting a much wider portrait of the somewhat shifting German attitude towards Hegel by stepping outside of academia and inviting the public into the conversation. On more than one occasion, the author mentions German comedian Florian Schroeder who took to the stage at a protest of coronavirus skeptics in Stuttgart (Hegel's birthplace) earlier this year and said: "Freedom doesn't mean being irresponsible. Freedom which only expresses itself as irresponsibility is the end of freedom" and "Freedom means you have to suffer someone like me. That, my friends, is dialectics." Hegel could not have said it better himself.

Another recent Guardian column (wittingly titled *Hegel, shmegel*) also reflects on the way politicians and other people in positions of power have used Hegel to shift public opinion. The column quotes Dr John Reid who referenced Hegel, saying: "I think the Owl of Minerva will spread its wings only with the coming of dusk." This was, of course, met with mixed (and very confused) reactions since "no one had a clue what it meant, but to admit it would have revealed their ignorance, so instead, they just nodded sagely."

"What Hegel meant was that the true significance of events is only evident once they have finished. When politicians try to say this, they usually sound evasive or pompous. Blair said that history, or his maker, would be his judge and everyone fell about laughing. If only he'd read his Hegel, he could have said much the same thing more obliquely and got away with it."³⁸

The author takes this argument even farther by stating that "Any policy which has a downside can be justified by appeal to Nietzsche" (referring to Nietzsche's famous words: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger"). Then he reminds us that the Aristotelian half of the truth about virtue and vice is that they are "learned".

These articles on Hegel and Heidegger, combined with Jean Baudrillard's³⁹ thoughts on Nietzsche and nihilism, created a parallel narrative within the context of this thesis. In a way, it challenged my perception of what "art-ness" might be, suggesting that the scenario of there being one grand idea of "art-ness" that we all agree on, is non-existent.

Reaching a final conclusion in regards to the loss of the real is not something one does within the frame of a single chapter. And perhaps this chain of thought that I am trying to build does not immediately make room for what seems to be a detour into a philosophical jungle full of myths and misunderstandings. Is the real indeed lost? Is art dead? How are the two connected? Will art

³⁸ Julian Baggini, The Guardian, accessed Sept.2020. Internet Source. (url: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/25/hegelshmegel>)

³⁹ Baudrillard, Jean. Game with Vestiges. In Baudrillard Live, edited by M. Gane, 1993. Also, Baudrillard, Jean. On Nihilism. In Simulacra and Simulation, translated by S. F. Glasser. 1994.

outlive postmodernism? While in limbo (the real being suspended), has art become "undead" like some kind of discombobulated zombie lurking in the outskirts of everyday life?

Despite all the confusion, I found it vastly important to at least attempt some level of understanding regarding the death of subjectivity and the real simply because art's current *raison d'être* may depend on it. And so far Hegel, Nietzsche, Baudrillard, and many more after them, seem to agree that something happened with our perception of reality; art took a spin into oblivion as it became irrelevant, because "things got a tad too abstract" as an art critic once said; Christianity had everything to do with that; Nihilism happened and it had terrible consequences; suddenly Shakespeare's "to be or not to be" being the question seemed chillingly relevant although it had nothing to do with any of this whatsoever.

The most peculiar thing here is that, despite our increased awareness of where and how we fit in the universe, the artworld and those who participate in it seem very much uninterested in postmodernism and its consequences. Most of us refuse to admit that there is something seriously wrong with the status quo despite witnessing the collapse of every discourse that motivated us to become artists in the first place. So maybe these philosophers were right and we cannot know the true significance of events until they have finished. We seem to accept a situation where we collectively "agree to disagree" as history happens before our very eyes in a way that can only be described as some kind of rapid eye movement that dreams us instead of the other way around. To that I say: "Cheers to all bearded white men and the art of consensus!"

As to Art with a capital A, despite being pronounced dead by Hegel and other philosophers, it seems to insist on existing and containing some kind of meaning, however elusive.

Chapter 2. Repeat and Reshuffle

"Artists: Any artist who is consistent is not being true to themselves. Unfurl the sails of inconsistency and uncertainty to reach the further shores of art." Jerry Saltz

Aiming at a much needed pause and regroup type of activity in order to recover from my attempt to unravel the so out of my reach loss of the real, I closed my computer and went to bed. I fell on my pillow thinking of the way art seems to be nesting within some of us who still see a purpose to it and some kind of meaning beyond their individual goals. Almost asleep, I thought to myself that this was somehow an important discovery and these two statements appeared in my mind's eye: "It resides within individuals trying to be their best selves, as in Foucault's *Technology Of The Self*" and "Remember the Snow Queen!".

The following morning, I woke up somewhat annoyed with myself for not taking any notes on the Snow Queen metaphor. What was that about?

Thankfully, she reemerged the next day bearing clarity.

Andersen's infamous tale *Snedronningen* or *The Snow Queen*, has an interesting spin in it involving a mirror. The story centres on the struggle between good and evil as experienced by Gerda and her friend, Kai. In the story, the devil has created a magic mirror that distorts the appearance of everything that it reflects (here I am thinking "art" when used for no good). The devil takes the mirror and his pupils throughout the world, delighting in using it to distort everyone and everything (here I am whispering "Ah, Christianity on the move"). They attempt to carry the mirror into heaven in order to make fools of the angels and God ("Ah, it is indeed Christianity" whispered louder), but the higher they lift it, the more the mirror shakes as they laugh, and it slips

from their grasp and falls back to earth (Hegel was there), shattering into billions of pieces, some no larger than a grain of sand. The splinters are blown by the wind all over the Earth and get into people's hearts and eyes, freezing their hearts like blocks of ice and making their eyes like the devil-mirror itself, seeing only the bad and ugly in people and things (Nietzsche saw that and warned us).

Not being able to resist the temptation of the mirror analogy, however far-fetched, I felt the pleasure of discovery thinking that indeed this grand idea of the divine purpose of art as Humanity's truth-teller is like the mirror in *Snedronningen* which is now shattered to pieces with each piece residing in the eyes of those "trying to be their best selves", not unlike the hypothetical selves in Foucault's "Technology Of The Self" Theory⁴⁰, attempting to enhance themselves by accepting the responsibility for hosting the grains of art's purpose and meaning.

But if that was indeed the case, then how come we all agree, at least on some level, that certain artworks have more "art-ness" than others? In addition, how come we all accept this structure we call "artworld" owning the definition of art if the meaning of art is somehow shattered to pieces with millions of pieces residing in millions of different individuals? There must be a trick to that — something that enables us (or maybe forces us) to accept and adapt to the idea of this omnipotent artworld.

(At some point in this thesis I will be returning to the mirror analogy as there is an ending to the tale. Later on, an attempt may be made to assemble the mirror, and following the analogy, I may be tempted to guess who or what gets to do exactly that for art. But for now, let us tackle the mechanics behind this above-mentioned "agreement to disagree" on truth and the meaning of art)

There is something about revisiting an object or a concept again and again. It keeps coming up in my notes like a common thread that all the authors I am referencing seem to mention in one context or another (almost always in relation to art). Something my best teachers always advised me to do when conducting research was to look for the common denominators and then observe the pattern. It is obvious that there is a pattern here and the common denominator is definitely repeat referencing. And again I am tempted to quote T. J. Clark: "art-ness is the capacity to invite repeated response" (2006:115).⁴¹

Someone posted a story on social media once. It was a story about a building that had a tile with a dog's paw print in it. Thinking about this tile, the person wrote: "... the thing was that after the dog did that print, the wet tile was dried, and then fired, and then shipped, and then laid, and for two thousand years every person who encountered that tile thought "aw! paw print!" and kept it." He was fascinated by the fact that thousands of people over all these centuries, "in memory of a dog only one of us could have met", decided that this tile had value.

The dog paw story made me think of the famous Zen kōan⁴² of Hakuin Ekaku⁴³, "The Sound of One Hand Clapping" (also the title of a famous novel by Richard Flanagan, which was how I got to the Japanese Zen part of this thread). The phrase kept occupying my thoughts as it created this visual bubble in my head that was populated with thousands of people clapping together in a collective effort to escape the limitations of time and space, with only one thing to unite them — a tile with a dog's paw in it.

⁴⁰ Foucault, Michel. *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

⁴¹ Clark, Timothy J., *The sight of death: An experiment in art writing*. Yale University Press, 2006.

⁴² A story, dialogue, question, or statement which is used in Zen practice to provoke the "great doubt" and to practice or test a student's progress in Zen.

⁴³ Referring to Hakuin Ekaku (白隠 慧鶴, 1686-1769) — one of the most influential figures in Japanese Zen Buddhism.

In a way, when people decide to become professional artists, they sign up to an unguaranteed spot in a repeated referencing queue, much like prepaying a ticket to a theatre play that has a limited number of seats. But who (or what) decides which artist gets the much desired ticket?

Chapter 3. The Rights To Subjectivity

3.1 Partial Subjectivity

First time I taught a university course at Dramatiska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden, I observed something very peculiar - the majority of the young adults in the room expressed disillusionment and a heavy feeling of insignificance "in a situation where their stories did not matter", to quote one of my students. This was for me uncharted territory. My own experience of art school may have been harsh and confusing in many ways, but even if I failed to picture myself as a successful artist (mainly because I was female), the idea of having a career as a creative professional was always shaped by hopes and dreams rather than disillusionment.

Listening to them talk after class, it was obvious to me that the whole concept of failure was wrapped up in fear to the point where it was completely detached from the artistic discourse. Being pressured to succeed in everything no matter what and, more importantly, being measured solely by one's level of "success" rather than what was learned during exploration, made failing irrelevant to the narrative of their identities.

When you think about it, the best stories involve conflict, striving after something that is difficult to achieve, which implies some kind of struggle. Simply put, without the struggle there is no hero and without a hero there is no story. Most stories are about a person or persons who struggle, fail again and again but continue the struggle until something happens, and/or something is achieved, and the story has an outcome. So, basically, in every good story there is a hero having a really tough time.

But how can we ever be the hero of our story if there is no failure? We are conditioned to avoid failure at all costs as adults and taught that failure is something "bad" as children. In our childhoods, we are presented with the unachievable goal to always succeed in everything. Succeeding in everything is of course impossible because in order to achieve one has to fail.

As mentioned in previous chapters, Nietzsche viewed humans as "the unfinished animal" (2016:292). Being born incomplete, he thought, is "our nature to strive".

"To strive is to envisage a desired goal and to stretch the self to it. Transcending our limitations, we become concentrated in our endeavors and channel our energies towards the end we elect. If we attain the end, our venture is crowned with success."⁴⁴

Simply put, there is no success without failure. Learning how to live is learning how to 'stretch the self' towards our desired goal, meaning we need to learn how to fail. People do unimaginable things to avoid failure even if it means doing absolutely nothing.

The notion that doing nothing is preferable to failing is unthinkable to me. That might have everything to do with the way I was raised and the fact that I grew up in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Say what you will about Communist regimes, but not unlike Christianity, they rely on metanarrative, and because of that they allow failure. It is, in other words, "fine" to fail

⁴⁴ Quinn, Malcolm, *Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Routledge: 2016

if the goal stretches only as far as Communist Ideology allows. The Communist Manifesto, The Bible, The Quran, The Kabbalah, whichever the book may be, living by metanarratives means that as long as you obey its rules, failure is sometimes permitted.

It wasn't until I became a parent in the so-called "Western" society, that I saw how desperately children needed to fail. It did not take long to discover that this new to me society had a problem with failure, especially when I was raising a child who seemed eager to realise his artistic potential at a very young age.

It was fascinating to watch my son draw, suddenly realising that what's on the paper does not live up to what the image in his mind looked like and then experiencing the joy of trying again and again until the drawing started to resample that desirable image. What would have happened if I, at that crucial moment of discovery, stopped him and told him that failing was "wrong" and even 'shameful'? Doing that would have meant raising a son who did not fail enough or, in other words, someone who avoided failure and gave up much too soon.

Living in a social system that does not recognize failure's role in artistic or indeed any kind of development is reason enough to feel stuck in an impossible situation. Add the all-powerful myth of the starving artist and you end up wrapped up in so much uncertainty that disillusionment becomes the norm rather than the exception.

The myth of the starving artist has dominated our culture for a long long time and it seems to make the lines between personal and artistic failure very blurry. This idea that artists starve because art is a "calling" rather than a profession, has been stifling the pursuits of creative people for many centuries.

As a modern discourse, the myth of the starving artist becomes somewhat problematic considering today's society pays little to no attention to poor people and starving in itself is seen as a failure. This said, somehow the myth is not only alive and kicking but has also manifested itself in real life. In 2018, the *Arts Pay Annual Survey* conducted by *Arts Professionals*⁴⁵ showed disturbing levels of exploitation in the creative industry. We seem to be stuck between a rock and a hard place and every time that happens, anyone interested in discourse theory would raise eyebrows and acknowledge the presence of a power struggle, which, of course, begs the question: *Who benefits?*

Some centuries ago, answering one's "calling" and becoming an artist may have earned a gentleman (and sometimes a lady), society's respect. But it was, and still is, an obstacle course. And in the era of postmodernism, nothing is as simple as answering "a calling" and sticking to the idea throughout one's life.

We have already established that understanding art's failure has a whole lot to do with understanding art's success. And when is art more successful than those moments in time when art is the instrument of change?

At the same time, if art historians went through so much trouble to keep "the monologue", i.e. the conventional, white, female-free, permeated in male reputation concerns, status quo in place, then it must be worth something to them in relation to societal order. And by looking at these moments of change, we may get to catch a glimpse of what that something of value is and, if we are lucky, maybe even a whiff of what is art's current definition of purpose.

So, who owns the rights to subjectivity?

⁴⁵ Exploitation rife as unpaid work subsidises the arts. Arts Professional. 2018 accessed July 2021. Internet Source. (url: <http://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/exploitation-rife-unpaid-work-subsidises-arts>)

The French philosopher Derrida discusses this in "Of Grammatology" stating that his deconstruction of the claims of objectivity go hand in hand with the deconstruction of subjectivity⁴⁶. Just as claims to objective truth are a narrative that must be dispelled, so too is subjectivity "a myth" (1997:17).

The Subject of absolute self-creation, even if it transcends all the determinations of the modern Subject in an immediately natural position (the particularity of race is a fitting example here), brings together and concretises these same determinations and sets itself up as the Subject.

Lacoue-Labarthe goes even farther. Self-creation, once a virtue, is here seen as fascistic. The definition of fascism being "a dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition and strong regimentation of society", in a way Humanism may be viewed as a fascism since it puts man at the centre and makes man's activity the substance of history.

As an example, Lacoue-Labarthe mentions how the initial reaction against the post-structuralist thinkers was to protest at their "extreme subjectivism and consequent dismissal of "objective truth". But what the critics of post-structuralism missed was that the Subject was also the target of deconstruction, even more so than the Object. There is a possibility in this double movement that Subject and Object are not opposed but mutually supporting. If one questions the singular objective ground, then the singular and unified Subject comes into question too. More importantly, "the degradation of the Subject destroys the basis of a sustained investigation of the objective. In prosaic terms, if we cannot be sure of the investigator, there can be no investigation" (1997:17).

Louis Althusser once said that "ideology interpellates individuals as Subjects"⁴⁷

Althusser was a theoretician in the sixties and seventies but also a lecturer at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure alongside Foucault and Derrida. Just like Foucault and Derrida he was concerned to dislodge the Subject from its exalted status. In his essay "Ideological state apparatuses"⁴⁸ Althusser argued that ideology has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects. What he meant was that The Subject is ideology's effect so to speak, and not the other way around. Ordinarily, we would say that persons — Subjects — have ideas, or rather that ideology is crafted to "deceive" Subjects about their true conditions. What Althusser states in the essay is that ideology does not only deceive Subjects into believing in myths such as just wars or other propaganda, he argues that the idea of oneself as a Subject, author of one's own destiny, is an illusion and that illusion is indeed fostered by ideology. In other words *The Subject does not exist before society*. Whereas we see Society as a contract between fully formed Subjects, Althusser sees the Subject as something that owes its existence entirely to the social order.

Once The Subject is seen as the contingent effect of society, then subjectivity is revealed as partial rather than universal. Those that society deigns to ennoble as "subjects" turn out to be a narrow and particular caste of individuals. This circle of chosen individuals with rights to subjectivity is exclusive to other sections, such as the lower classes, women, non-Europeans, and others. Like the insight that the Subject is historically bounded, the view that the Subject is socially limited is unquestionably true.

But how does Althusser's partial subjectivity theory apply to art?

⁴⁶ Of Grammatology, Maryland: John Hopkins UP (1997).

⁴⁷ Althusser, Louis. *Identity: A reader* (2000): 31-38.

⁴⁸ Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *The anthropology of the state: A reader* 9.1 (2006): 86-98.

3.2 The Others

One of the most important recent discoveries in the field of art history is that of Pollock and Parker, thoroughly documented in their groundbreaking book *Old Mistresses*⁴⁹. What they discovered was that the discursive formation of Art History was not just "passively forgetful" but structurally and actively excluded women for being considered able when it comes to participating in the realm of art, i.e. being an artist. What was even more interesting was the fact that this active exclusion happened in the beginning of the 20th century in the moment of Modernity (around 1929) and not before.

While researching art historical texts for the *Old Mistresses*, Pollock and Parker noticed a strange phenomenon related to the opening of *The Museum of Modern Art* in New York City. It is when the massive disappearance of female artists from art history happened and it was almost overnight.

Prior to their discovery they note "The trickle of references to women artists in the seventeenth century grows by the eighteenth century to become a flood in the nineteenth century." (1981:3) What they see is "lengthy surveys" on women in art from ancient Greece up to the modern day when these surveys and their findings were published. And the "flood" was happening throughout Europe. Pollock and Parker name a number of publications, among others, Ernst Guhl's *Die Frauen in der Kunstgeschichte* (1858), Elisabeth Ellet's *Women Artists In All Ages And Countries* (1859), Ellen Clayton's *English Female Artists* (1876), Walter Sparrow's *Women Painters Of The World* (1905), and the impressive over thousand entries on female artists by Clara Clement in her encyclopedia *Women In The Fine Arts From The 7th Century BC To The 20th Century* (1904).

What the authors find curious is the fact that the peak of interest in female artists "dwindles" just as women's emancipation movements start to pick up. Something that should have perhaps "prompted a greater awareness in women's participation in all walks of life" seems to have done just the opposite - initiated the erasure of all female artists from art history. Twentieth century art historians had a sufficient enough number of sources that confirmed the existence of female artists prior to their modern times. Yet they choose to be silent about them. And the silence was "deafening". Popular art history works such as E.H. Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1961) and H.W. Janson's *History of Art* (1962) do not mention any female artists at all. It is worth mentioning here that both books are still used in schools and universities throughout the world.

In order to illustrate the full implications of that silence, Pollock and Parker quote an excerpt from an address written by the organisers of the 1972 exhibition *Old Mistresses: Women Artists Of The Past*:

"The title of this exhibition alludes to the unspoken assumption in our language that art is created by men. The reverential term "Old Master" has no meaningful equivalent, when cast in its feminine form. "Old Mistress", the connotation is altogether different, to say the least."⁵⁰

Looking for the mechanics behind this change of heart regarding the *raison d'être* of female persons in relationship to art and its history, Pollock and Parker look at the attitudes perpetuated in contemporary criticism. The notable quotes are many. There is the chairman of an art department who said to a female artist: "You'll never be an artist, you'll just have babies" (1981:6)

⁴⁹ Parker, Rozsika, Griselda Pollock, and Rozsika Parker. *Old mistresses: Women, art and ideology*. London: Pandora, 1981.

⁵⁰ A. Gabhart and E. Broun, *Walters Art Gallery Bulletin*, Vol 24, No 7, 1972 in Parker, Rozsika, Griselda Pollock, and Rozsika Parker. *Old mistresses: Women, art and ideology*. London: Pandora, 1981 (p.6).

and a lecturer at *Slade School of Art*, the sculptor Reg Butler, who proposed the same identification of women with procreativity versus men with cultural creativity. Butler famously stated that “the vitality of many female students derives from frustrated maternity”. “Can a woman become a vital creative artist without ceasing to be a woman except for the purposes of a census?”, he asked.

This assumption that women are too busy procreating to be bothered with cultural creation laid the foundation of a widespread belief in women's innate artistic failure and all the discourses that followed in its path.

These events set the tone for centuries to come to the point where art as a field is yet to recover and female and other marginalized artists are hitting not one but many glass ceilings to this very day.

In the introduction of *The Queer Art of Failure*⁵¹ Judith and Jack Halberstam write:

"From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure always means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideas, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures."

It is interesting how often the topic of negativity vs. positivity rears its head whenever feminist movements are discussed. Despite the efforts of many notable contemporary philosophers specialising in gender theory to move the discussion away from the common belief that women have to be “accommodating” in order to achieve change, this argument of “positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection and transformation” (2014:4), seems to continuously get in the way of the gender equality movement. According to the Halberstams, what they call 'shadow feminists’ take the form "not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming and violating." This statement is full of contradictions. How can we talk about “becoming” when we already are?

In an effort to back their arguments, the authors mention Monique Wittig who in the 1970s argued that "if a womanhood depends upon a heterosexual framework, then lesbians are not “women,” and if lesbians are not “women,” then they fall outside of patriarchal norms and can re-create some of the meaning of their genders." Other than the nickname “shadow feminist”, the example is left without context.

Another example they give is Valerie Solanas who suggested that “if “woman” takes on meaning only in relation to “man,” then we need to “cut up men” (2004:72 in 2014:4)". Perhaps that is "a little drastic", the Halberstams state and add that these kinds of feminisms (the “shadow feminisms” as they call them) "have long haunted the more acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented to positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection and transformation."

The very notion of becoming "accommodating" in an effort to be "positive" contradicts the whole idea of striving towards gender equality. How can women be equal to men if they are required to adapt to the male dominated framework? It makes no sense.

One does not have to look far in order to find examples of how this applies to art created by women and the innate failure of female artists. Even art itself is often understood as something men do. Recognised geniuses of modern art such as Picasso and Van Gogh had a clear problem with seeing art as anything else than a male domain. Van Gogh's masculine approach to art making is well documented. As Gopnik points out in "Van Gogh's Ear" (2010), "he wanted his

⁵¹ Halberstam, Judith, and Jack Halberstam. *The queer art of failure*. Duke University Press, 2011

pictures to be sacred, but he also wanted them to be “spermatic”—sublimated explosions of a sexual vitality that he could rarely achieve in life.”⁵² This is also mentioned in Pollock and Parker's book *Old Mistresses* (1981). According to his peers, Van Gogh often claimed that good art is “spermatic” and to keep it “spermatic” one needs to keep a strict diet and abstain from sex.⁵³

What does that statement tell us about Modernity and its attitude to the hierarchies of art making?

"In its own eyes, Western humanism is love of humanity, but to others it is merely the custom and institution of a group of men, their password, and sometimes their battle cry."
— Merleau-Ponty

With this quote begins the first chapter of Clyde Taylor's *The mask of art: breaking the aesthetic contract--film and literature*⁵⁴. Taylor places the starting point of what he refers to as "the present crisis of knowledge" in the 1960s when the prevailing cultural and social discourse, or as he calls it — the "monologue of cultural and social discourse" — was shattered by dissident voices. These dissident voices included the Black Liberation movement, feminists, youth culture, the articulation of gay identity and Chicano-Latino movements but also their parallels in Europe with their peak in the May 1968 movement and the Third World anti-colonial revolutions that raptured a world-wide colonial structure that went undisrupted and unquestioned for centuries.

What Taylor presents next is the way in which those who sustained "the monologue" responded to the disruption of it. These "gatekeepers of honorable culture" responded with the same neglect, indifference and hostility usually directed to African American cultural works, by arguing that aesthetic values are universal and there can be no specific Black Aesthetics or any other specific aesthetics.

This rhetoric sounds familiar to everyone who has studied 19th century art history. By stating that there is such a thing as "universal aesthetic values", one claims the throne for the prevailing cultural and social discourse and disregards everything else.

This said, something did happen in the 1960s. As Taylor states, the outbreak of the formerly silenced provoked new agendas for research and study. With that came revisions of history that led to the displacing of institutional centers and the authorities that legitimized them. The rise of aesthetic pluralism was established by those who sought to oppose cultural fundamentalism and were committed to a transformative view of history based on the idea of many aesthetics. This transformation was jump-started not only by Black Aesthetics but also by movements such as the Situationist International in France that culminated the inherited from dada and the European avant-garde disenchantment with art institutions and produced huge effects in, among others, Michael Foucault's philosophy.

In *The Queer Art Of Failure*⁵⁵, the authors mention the possibility of there being certain “benefits” and “rewards” to failing. They ask: What kind of reward can failure offer us? Among said rewards, they mention that “failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to elderly and predictable adulthoods.” What failure does is preserve “some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers”. While admitting that failure often comes accompanied by many negative effects such

⁵² Gopnik, Adam. "Van Gogh's Ear." *The New Yorker* 4, 2010.

⁵³ Griselda Pollock, and Rozsika Parker. *Old mistresses: Women, art and ideology*. London: Pandora, 1981.

⁵⁴ Taylor, Clyde. *The mask of art: breaking the aesthetic contract--film and literature*. Indiana University Press, 1998.

⁵⁵ Halberstam, Judith, and Jack Halberstam. *The queer art of failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.

as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, to mention a few, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative effects to “poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life”.

As Barbara Ehrenreich reminds us in *Bright-sided*, positive thinking is a North American affliction, “a mass delusion” that emerges out of a combination of American exceptionalism and a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions (2009:13)”

Barbara Ehrenreich offers an accurate description of what the artworld is like. There are people in it who are successful and there are all the others. And once one becomes “successful”, one can never fail. And if somehow one manages to fail, it will always be a personal failure and not an artistic one. Why is that? The only answer I can think of is as follows: a personal failure is something one can recover from, either by apologizing or by redeeming oneself in a way of good deeds or, as in Van Gogh’s case, madness.

Artistic failure is a different animal altogether. How does one recover from that?

Chapter 4. The Exchange

4.1 His Art Or His Ear

“What bakes my noodle: Would Van Gogh have become Van Gogh without the ear?”

I have no memories regarding the context (or origin for that matter) of this quote. I found it in one of my old notebooks from almost two decades ago. One thing is certain, this has always been a fascinating story.

There are thousands of examples of Art History’s preoccupation with personal failure, from historical records saturated with speculations about individual artists’ sinful-ness to today’s mediated realities where personal lives seem to matter as much or even more than the aesthetic value of one’s work. But in order to even begin to understand this preoccupation with personal failure, I had to examine its various manifestations by looking at a number of famed artists, first in line being, understandably so, Van Gogh.

My first college mentor, Joan Francis, used to say: “If you mention Van Gogh’s name, his severed ear is the first thing that comes to mind. The second thing is the staggering market value of his work. The artistic value of his art is all but lost in the context. The average person can’t make heads or tails of it all.”

As a brand, the name Van Gogh more than exemplifies the meaning behind the word “famed”. For most of us, Van Gogh, Leonardo or Picasso, are names we associate with art from the very first time we even realized there was such a thing as art, long before we knew what art actually was.

As historical documents tell us, Vincent’s mother Anna delivered a stillborn baby named Vincent in 1852. She buried the baby in the small Protestant cemetery next to a church. Exactly one year later to the day the future famed painter was born and named Vincent Willems van Gogh.

Vincent’s mother bore six children who survived. She regarded children as “holy” and parenthood as “sacred”, and viewed her family as a “refuge from the chaos of the world”. All of the children grew up clinging to the family. Anna never understood Vincent, her eldest son, because “his

eccentricities undermined her sense of order in the world” (2017). According to records, Vincent never understood why Anna rejected him, and he never stopped longing for her approval.⁵⁶

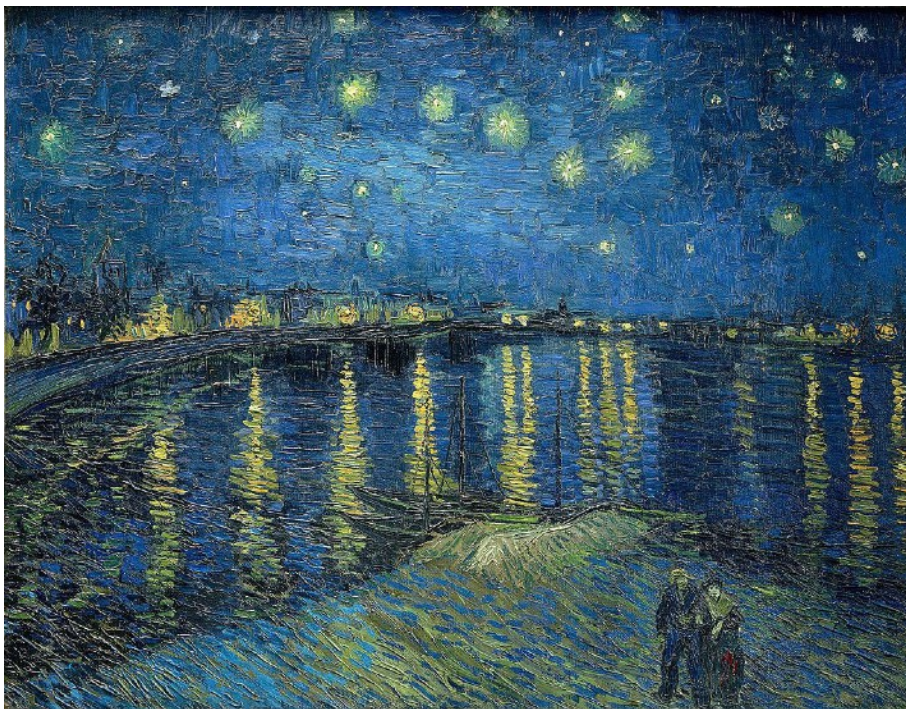
Vincent’s closest childhood companion was his younger brother Theo. Vincent was perceived as strange as he was “aloof, dark, and suspicious”, while his brother Theo was “outgoing, bright, and friendly”.

When Vincent was 11 years old, the family sent him to a boarding school in Zevenbergen, where he was lonely and homesick. At the boarding school in Zevenbergen, Vincent took courses in art education. What he learned came out many years later in his paintings. After two years, his parents transferred him to another boarding school but in 1868 Vincent left school before finishing the term and walked seven hours back home “because he wanted to be at home with his family” (2017).

When his uncle established an art dealership, Vincent began working for him in his office in Hague. While in Hague, Vincent met Caroline Haanebeek who was “a pretty blonde of whom his parents approved”. When Caroline married someone else, Vincent declared: “If I cannot get a good woman, I shall take a bad one”. In the fall of 1872 he began his life-long practice of visiting prostitutes (2017).

Vincent struggled when working with customers because of his shyness and awkward behavior. The family feared that this awkward behavior could discredit the family name, so his uncle decided to transfer Vincent to the London branch of the business which was wholesale only meaning Vincent would not have direct contact with customers. In his letters to Theo, Vincent clearly stated that he was lonely and found London, “dirty”, “unfriendly” and “too far from nature”.

After toying with the idea of becoming a minister, in August 1880 Vincent announced that he was an artist. Theo began to support him financially, and he would continue doing that for the remainder of Vincent’s life as the painter had become asocial and lacking social graces. He



Van Gogh: Starry Night Over the Rhône 1888. Image Source: Wikipedia Commons

believed that social interactions were “a choice between assaulting or being assaulted”. Vincent remembered that his father earlier had the intention to commit him to an asylum so when going home for Christmas in 1881, he refused to attend holiday church services. His father ordered him out of his house and demanded that he never return. Vincent never overcame his father’s rejection.

Vincent returned to Hague with anger and bitterness. His “periodic fits of rage, followed by grudging

⁵⁶ Hughes, Richard A. "Tragic Destiny in the Life and Death of Vincent van Gogh.": 2017.

efforts at reconciliation, followed by meaningless vows of indifference ..." are well documented.

In 1882 he began a love affair with a then pregnant prostitute Clasina Hoornik. When she delivered her baby, they became his substitute family. Clasina Hoornik was "physically unattractive", but Vincent considered her "an angel" (2017). He rented an apartment for his "family" and wanted to marry her, but Theo dissuaded him from the marriage. Two years later Vincent broke off the relationship with her.

After spending a period of time in Drenthe, a town of poverty and bleakness where he painted the peat fields, Vincent returned home in time for the 1883 holidays.

By the end of 1885 he had contracted syphilis and although he was receiving treatment, his health deteriorated. He had been visiting prostitutes in several cities using them for both sex and modeling. In 1886, Vincent enrolled in painting and drawing classes at the *Royal Academy of Art* in Antwerp. After a month or so, however, his life was collapsing. "His teeth rotted and broke. He was weak and feverish and painted nothing but images of death" (2017).

In Arles, Van Gogh spent many nights observing the night sky and stars, which in Paris were obscured by the city lights. He decided to paint the night sky in Arles. The infamous *Starry Night over the Rhone* was painted in September 1888.

The painting had a vast symbolic value to him as he believed that if he could capture the stars and infinite sky in paint, his loneliness might end (2017).



Van Gogh: Peat Bog / Peatery in Dronthe 1883-1890.
Image Source: Wikipedia Commons.

Later that year, Vincent invited Paul Gauguin to come to Arles and work with him. Gauguin arrived the day before Christmas, The two men did not work well, however, due to Vincent manic tantrums. He would often roam the house during nights and early mornings.

On Christmas Eve Vincent fell gravely ill. The police came to pick him up and he was hospitalized at Hôtel Dieu, where he was placed in an isolation ward.

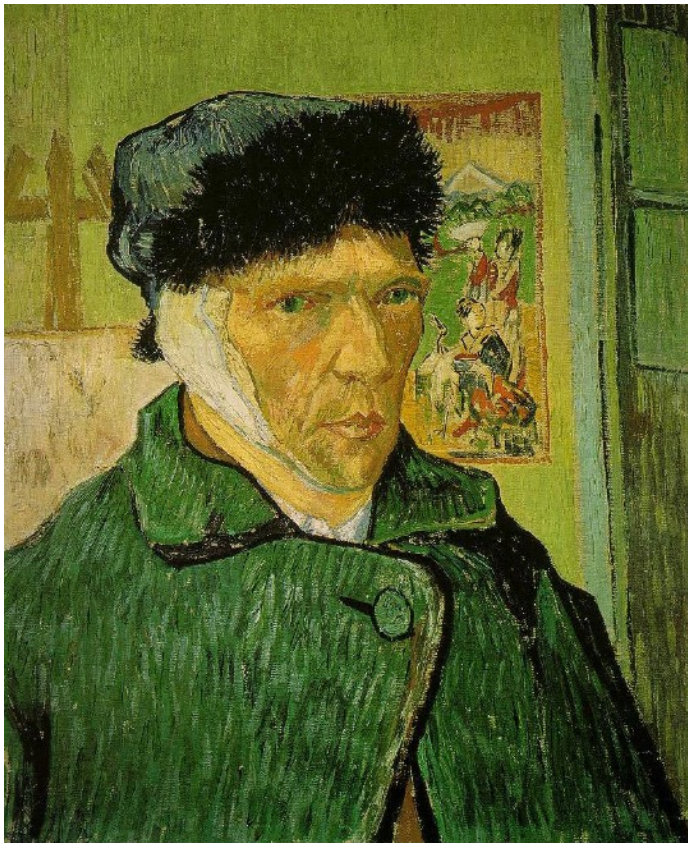
It was known that Vincent's maternal grandfather Willem

Carbentus had died of a mental disease and, after reviewing his family history, his doctor diagnosed him with epilepsy. "His maternal aunt had epilepsy throughout her life as an unmarried woman, and a maternal uncle died by suicide. Vincent felt liberated by the diagnosis, and he resumed painting" (2017).

The Starry Night was completed in 1889. The painting was meant to express Vincent's vision of "ultimate serenity" with "a kaleidoscope of pulsating beacons, whirlpool of stars, radiant cloud, and a moon that shone as brightly as any sun"⁵⁷. Throughout that summer, Vincent had a series of manic episodes accompanied by seizures, vertigo, unconsciousness and religiously themed hallucinations. These attacks grew more frequent by the end of that summer.

On July 27, 1890 he went out carrying his easel and painting materials. After a light meal at the nearby inn, he went back out to paint. Later that evening he walked back, "holding his abdomen", and went to bed in his room. The innkeeper Gustav Ravoux heard him cry out in pain and went to check on him. He found him curled up in pain mumbling: "I wounded myself". He had been shot in his upper abdomen, and died 37 years old, 30 hours later on July 30th (2017).

Vincent Van Gogh's legacy goes far beyond his visionary post-Impressionistic collection of paintings. The artist's impulsive act of self-mutilation, just before Christmas in 1888, is a key part of the Van Gogh legacy, and for decades now, new theories regarding what really happened that dark night in Arles, France, continue to fuel an ongoing controversy.



Van Gogh: With bandaged ear. 1889.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

As mentioned earlier, late one Sunday evening (December 23d, 1888) Vincent Van Gogh cut the bottom half of his ear off. After cutting it off, he put the ear in a box and carried the box to a brothel, where he asked for a prostitute named Rachel and handed the ear to her, asking her to "keep this object carefully".⁵⁸

Why did he do such a thing? There have been numerous explanations offered by art historians and psychologists. One of the most quoted theories is the one offered by Lubin⁵⁹. According to Lubin, Vincent was frustrated by two recent events. One was the engagement of his brother Theo and the other was his failure to establish a close relationship with the artist Paul Gauguin. The "aggressive impulses aroused by these frustrations were first directed at Gauguin, but then were turned against himself" (Lubin, 1972).

Another explanation, offered in 1951 by Holstijn, AJ Westerman and Hans P. Winzen⁶⁰ is that Vincent cut his ear off because of an emotional upheaval

resulting from "homosexual impulses aroused by Gauguin's presence". This account is based on

⁵⁷ Naifeh, Steven and Smith, Gregory W. 2011. *Van Gogh, The Life*. New York: Random House

⁵⁸ Runyan, William M. "Why did Van Gogh cut off his ear? The problem of alternative explanations in psychobiography." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40.6 (1981): 1070.

⁵⁹ Lubin, Albert J. *Stranger on the earth: a psychological biography of Vincent van Gogh*. Holt, Rinehart Winston, 1972.

⁶⁰ Holstijn, AJ Westerman, and Hans P. Winzen. "The psychological development of Vincent van Gogh." *American Imago* 8.3 (1951): 239-273.

the assumption that this act of self-mutilation was symbolic. According to Westerman and Winzen, the ear was a phallic symbol as the Dutch word for penis is *lul* and the Dutch word for ear is *lel*, thus making this “a symbolic self-castration” (Westerman & Winzen, 1951).

As Natalie Heinich⁶¹ explains in her work dedicated to exploring the man vs. oeuvre dilemma in the case of Van Gogh, madness can become currency. Nietzsche famously prophesied: "Madness thus acquires value" meaning this is no longer about aesthetics, "but rather a moral process, since it is the price paid by the singular individual for the salvation of his or her fellows." Here, Heinich recognises the logic to the notion of "the gift" which is innate to every sacrifice. She goes on to quote Bataille who states that integrity and madness go hand in hand, giving Nietzsche as an example (1997:86). Nietzsche went mad "in our stead", he claims, "thus making the integral character possible". But madness in itself does not count. Those who went mad before Nietzsche, Bataille explains, did not do it with his "brilliance", meaning their "gift" was not acknowledged.

Here, the author asks a key question: "But can a man's gift of his madness to his fellow men be accepted by them, without being returned with interest?". And furthermore, "what could compensate for such a gift?"

Heinich answers the question promptly by suggesting that the answer is easy to guess and is, of course, "guilt". Madness is a diagnosis and as such erases any wrongdoing and any failure that this "mad" individual can be accused of. Heinich uses the expression "excluded individual" here meaning that the psychiatric hypothesis has removed this specific individual from the rest of us who will suffer the obvious consequence of wrongful actions - judgement. The diagnosis implies innocence which is the result from a handicap for which one cannot be held responsible. Opposing that, there is the above mentioned sacrificial hypothesis which "reintroduces" the excluded individual back into the community because his or her "gift" has been accepted and a debt has thus been in a sense repaid (1997:86).

4.2 Caravaggio The Criminal

Caravaggio's images freeze time but also seem to hover on the brink of their own disappearance. Faces are brightly illuminated. Details emerge from darkness with such uncanny clarity that they might be hallucinations. Yet always the shadows encroach, the pools of blackness that threaten to obliterate all. *Looking at his pictures is like looking at the world by flashes of lightning.*"⁶²

This thoughtful reflection on Caravaggio's work is Andrew Graham-Dixon's. In his book *Caravaggio: A life sacred and profane*, Graham-Dixon explores the intersection between the intricate nature of Caravaggio's work and the even more intricate nature of his legacy.

“The majority of his recorded acts - apart from those involved in painting - are crimes and misdemeanors. When Caravaggio emerges from the obscurity of the past he does so, like the characters in his own paintings, as a man in *extremis*.” (2011:4)

⁶¹ Heinich, Nathalie. *The glory of Van Gogh: An anthropology of admiration*. Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁶² Graham-Dixon, Andrew. *Caravaggio: A life sacred and profane*. WW Norton & Company, 2011.

“The artist's life can easily seem merely chaotic, the rise and fall of an incurable hot-head, a man so governed by passion that his actions unfold without rhyme or reason (this was for centuries, the prevailing view of him). But there is a logic to it all, with hindsight, a tragic inevitability.” (2011:4)

“*The idea that he was an early martyr to the drives of an unconventional sexuality is an anachronistic fiction.*” (2011:4)

There are three early biographies of Caravaggio. Unfortunately they were all composed and published after his death and inaccurate for different reasons. One is by Giulio Mancini, a physician from Siena who met the painter in Rome around 1590-1592 and claimed to know him rather well. The second was by Baglione who was a rival painter, often in quarrel (including numerous fights) with Caravaggio. He held a grudge to such a degree that he hired an assassin to kill the artist. Baglione's and Caravaggio's history makes that second biography one interesting read, but contrary to what one might expect, Baglione was surprisingly objective. Many later discoveries confirmed Baglione's accounts of the mere facts although his conclusions were somewhat derogatory and smug.

The third one was written by a theorist by the name of Bellori three decades later. He never knew Caravaggio so he based his accounts on the first two biographies (2011:5).

Ballori drew his material mostly from Baglione but he also obtained some new facts. He went through the trouble of viewing as much of Caravaggio's work as he could, was fascinated by it, especially the novelty of his technique, and wrote about Caravaggio's paintings with much greater sensitivity than Mancini and Baglione put together. “Yet, he was also fundamentally appalled by it” (2011:6). He wrote:

“Repudiating all other rules, [Caravaggio] considered the highest achievement not to be bound by art. For this innovation he was greatly acclaimed, and many talented artists seemed compelled to follow him... Such praise caused Caravaggio to appreciate himself alone, and he claimed to be the only faithful imitator of nature. Nevertheless, he lacked *invenzione, decorum, disegno* [draughtsmanship], or any knowledge of the science of painting. The moment the model was taken from him, his hand and his mind became empty.” (2011:7)

There is a lot to unpack here. Firstly, there is an interesting distinction between the “many talented artists” that followed Caravaggio because they “seemed compelled” and whoever holds the rights to subjectivity. The “many talented artists” seem to account for nothing because Caravaggio “appreciates himself alone”. Ballori gives himself the right to judge and deems Caravaggio lacking of “*invenzione, decorum, disegno*” and accuses the painter of emptiness caused by not having “any knowledge of the science of painting”.

Somehow, in Ballori's mind, “repudiating all other rules” leads to lack of invention, decorum and draughtsmanship, which in turn translates to being nothing but an empty imitator of whatever is being depicted. Not obeying the rules of society, art and its patrons, seems to translate to creating something meaningless in Ballori's eyes.

Because of Caravaggio's reputation, his biographies were written differently than those of other artists of his time. In his revolutionary book *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*⁶³ Giorgio Vasari established a certain “formulae” for writing the life of an artist, particularly famed painters and sculptors. Giotto is a textbook example of how this was done. Much like recognised modern art geniuses such as Picasso and Salvador Dali, Giotto was

⁶³ Graham-Dixon, Andrew. *Caravaggio: A life sacred and profane*. WW Norton & Company, 2011.

described as “establishing himself as a miraculous protege at an early age”. The “brilliance of Giotto”, for example, is said to have been discovered by the older artist Cimabue, “who came upon the young man when he was still a callow shepherd and found him drawing perfectly upon a stone” (2011:8). Such praises were never spoken or written about Caravaggio's early accomplishments as an artist. His childhood was merely mentioned and compressed in two sentences by his biographer Mancini. In Baglione's case, it was a short paragraph.

Bellori has one anecdote about Caravaggio's training that was obviously placed to illustrate the painter's principal failing and supposed “lack of intellect” rather than tell a story or inspire knowledge on the matter. He writes about Caravaggio's early days as a helper who “prepared glue” for some painters doing murals in Milan where he was employed to help his father - a mason. While the young Caravaggio helped his father, he became interested in painting and started doing it more and more. According to Bellori, Caravaggio “committed to this activity for four or five years”. There is no doubt that this was meant to convey a message about the boy painter's “unreflective training” and his failure “to recognise no other master than the model, without selecting from the best forms of nature”. By “just painting” young Caravaggio skipped a step in his training (the step being learning from notable tutors) and because of that he was labeled as someone who “could never rise from mere craft”. Although it may in many ways explain his groundbreaking talent and revolutionary approach, “just painting” and learning from nature rather than spending his young years in older artists' studios obeying the rules of tutor and whoever their patron was at the time, Caravaggio's presumed lack of formal training was used to underline the statement that he was indeed a lone wolf and because of that also a failed artist. According to his biographers, he was nothing but a mason's son - an apple that never fell far from the tree.

This said, the story about Caravaggio “just painting” was not exactly true. He could not have spent “four or five years” preparing glue for his father because his father died when Caravaggio was only five years old (2011:8).

But it is not only about Caravaggio's training as an artist or the company he kept. It is also about class. 'social class, in particular questions of "nobility and virtue", would be at issue in many of Caravaggio's future disputes and quarrels. These were matters of intense debate in medieval and Renaissance Italy (2011:11).”

As Graham-Dixon explains, In northern Europe, the aristocracy was well known for taking its own pre-eminence for granted. They automatically assumed that nobility was a quality that could only truly be inherent “in those fortunate enough to be born into the upper, landed classes”. A nobleman could easily be identified amongst them. He would be “a man of virtue and pure blood, who had the right to bear arms in the service of his monarch, who was a skilled swordsman and horseman and would never dirty his hands with trade”.

In Mancini's biography of the painter, Caravaggio was born into a family of “very honorable citizens”, *cittadini* was the word he used which was entirely accurate given the painter's maternal grandfather Giovan Giacomo Aratori was referred in documents as *signor, messer* (equivalent to “Mister”), or *dominos*, meaning a person with higher status in society.

The fact that Caravaggio never married was another part of his story that was often used to illustrate his “lack of morals”. But considering the attitude towards marriage amongst the Milaneze men, that fact is not at all surprising. Distrust of matrimony was common enough in the sixteenth- and seventeenth century, especially among the upper classes where marriage was considered “a distraction to the intellect and a potential cause of financial ruin” (2011:14). The rate of celibacy among the men in Milan at that point was so high that it often exceeded half of all men, not just the eligible ones.

When it comes to Caravaggio's love for swordfighting, another fact often used to illustrate his allegedly questionable state of mind, it can also be seen as part of sixteenth- and seventeenth century culture. As Graham-Dixon writes: "The ability to fight was certainly just as important, to a young man out to impress, as the clothes he wore". Swordsmanship was seen as a part of the "intangible code of pseudo-chivalric skills and values encompassed by the Italian words *virtú* and *nobilitá*".

To this day, many believe that Caravaggio "kept getting into trouble" because he remained true to his "tormented artist" persona. But he was also made to seem guilty by association. He kept company with some fairly documented "wild men", including Onorio Longhi, who was so temperamental that his biographer once said he had a "head that smoked" and also "the angry young men" who lived by the motto "*nec spe, nec metu*," which means "without hope, without fear."⁶⁴

Drinking, sword fighting, not having a "legitimate" arts training as a child... These are only some of the things that kept Caravaggio out of the art historical genius category. *But we are talking about alleged personal failures here, not artistic failures. Why might that be?*

In her article *Sex, Violence and Faith: The Art of Caravaggio*⁶⁵, Amelia Arenó writes about the portrayal of saints:



Bacchus by Caravaggio (c. 1596).
Source: Wikimedia Commons

"The sanctity of these characters has always been "a matter of faith" —in the past, it was faith in the teachings of the Church; now, in the reliability of museum labels. But when you get to the age of Caravaggio in your museum walk, you'll notice a visible change. You see a bewildered old man about to be hung upside down like a butcher's carcass; a man sticking his finger inside another's open wound; a venerable elder ready to slice the throat of a screaming child. It matters little whether you're Christian or not, or whether you're familiar with Christian art. You're involved. You're a witness to these horrors. You're almost an accomplice."

What Caravaggio did was astounding and too captivating to leave unnoticed. Why? Because it was the truth.

"As you keep walking through the galleries, you'll see one Caravaggio-look-alike after another, because

⁶⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica: 2021, accessed July 2021: www.britannica.com/biography/Caravaggio/Successful-artist-and-criminal

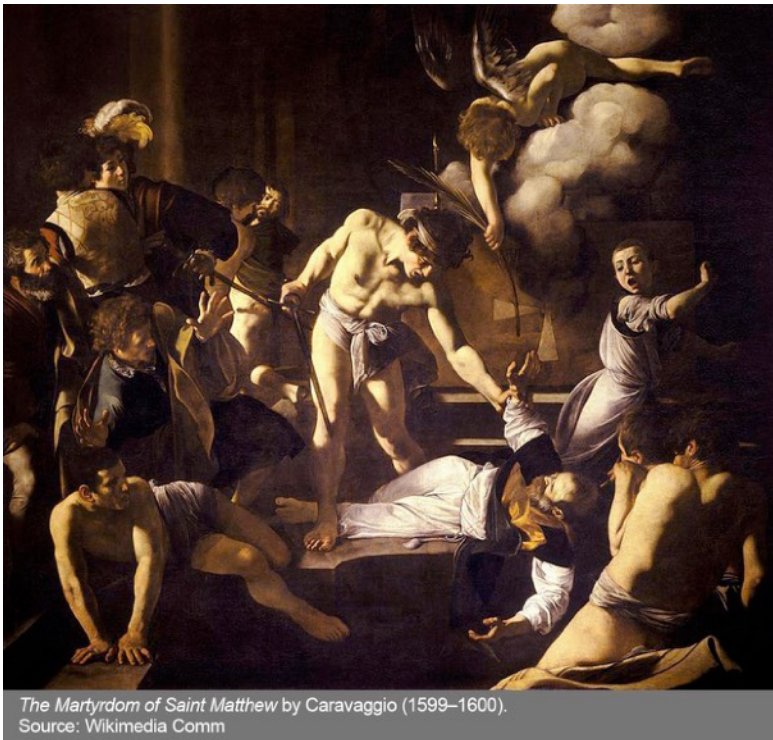
⁶⁵ Arenas, Amelia. "sex, Violence and Faith: The Art of Caravaggio." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 23.3 (2016): 35-52.

during his short and controversial life, the taste for his art spread to every corner of the Christian world.” (2016:35)

But Caravaggio did not stop there. He pushed the boundaries of society in a way that no artist before him has ever done—he painted what he saw, which meant charging his figures with humanity and forbidden sexuality. Amelia Arenas describes it perfectly:

“He (Caravaggio’s Bacchus) is in the anonymous devotional postcards that beggars sell at the doorsteps of every village church from Italy to the Philippines. He’s behind the camera

during the climax of all horror movies. He’s even in the magazine section of most pornography shops. Observe the source: Caravaggio’s Bacchus (fig. 4)—or rather, the Roman boy with dirty fingernails and plucked eyebrows that the artist dressed up as the pagan god of drunkenness— lies on a couch offering you a glass filled to the brim with wine.”



She challenges the readers to put themselves in the shoes of Caravaggio's contemporaries, viewing a portrait that is much too alive to ignore: “You are at risk”, she writes. “He fingers the black sash that holds his tunic and looks at you with sly, disdainful eyes and an incipient snicker, as if he could see in you some of his own lewdness,

but none of his calm.” There is a bowl on the table. The bowl is “overflowing with fruit and garnished with leaves echoes the plump face framed in a garland of grape leaves”. And finally, she arrives at what Caravaggio has done to the viewer: “Like the fruit, the boy is prematurely ripe—or, rather, bruised. It’s impossible to over-interpret the sexual content of this image, for the erotic appeal of Caravaggio’s boys is as vivid as the suffering of his martyrs.”

According to Graham-Dixon, Caravaggio is “attached like an anchor to his posthumous reputation”, for a long time remaining “untutored”, a “thoughtless virtuoso” and “a master of a debased and pernicious brand of naturalism”. But the facts say something different. Caravaggio was extremely thoughtful, even too thoughtful at times. He was a greatly intuitive painter, and a “close and careful” reader of the texts that he was called to embody in his creations. Yet, his contemporaries labeled him a “thoughtless” and “empty” talent. To this day, his talent is questioned because he did not conform to the requirements of church, patrons and peers. In an article titled *Caravaggio Was Not Great; Or, How Domenichino Made Improvements*, published by University of Chicago, William Wallace writes:

“Caravaggio was fashionable and highly influential, but he did not generally conform to the strictures of religious painting. Witness his many difficulties... In Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, the angel leans over a couch-like cloudbank and performs a gymnastic feat of contortion, exposing more of his buttocks than his face, to offer the martyr's palm to Matthew. The improbable pose is a brilliant and beautiful invention but a Mannerist affectation, difficult to decipher, and utterly illogical. Did Caravaggio go too far? If art was meant to be legible and to avoid excessive displays of maniera, Caravaggio's extravagant



The Calling of Saint Matthew by Caravaggio (1599–1600).
Source: Wikimedia Commons

angel defies all limits. Enter Domenichino. Domenichino's *Martyrdom of Saint Cecilia* ostensibly has little in common with Caravaggio's depiction of Matthew's violent demise. One common element, however, is the angel who confers the martyr's palm. Unlike Caravaggio's balletic contortionist, Domenichino's angel is clearly visible and fully illuminated, and plays a central role in the composition and narrative.” (2011:35-36)

So, because Caravaggio's angel is doing a “balletic contortionist act”, his art is not legible? First of all, who said that art “was meant to avoid excessive displays of maniera” to be legible? On the contrary, art is meant to do all sorts of things and



The Inspiration of Saint Matthew by Caravaggio (1602).
Source: Wikimedia Commons



Matthew the Evangelist by Domenichino (1622-1628).
Source: Wikimedia Commons

one of them is to challenge conformity and go against the grain. So the fact that “Caravaggio's extravagant angel defies all limits” is a great thing when it comes to art.

More examples of unruly expression and Domenichino's so-called “corrections”:

“It is perhaps telling that the only unruly figure in Domenichino's picture is the child at the far left, who may be seen as a counterpart to the noisily expressive youth fleeing at the right of Caravaggio's murderous scene. In contrast to his more theatrical contemporary, Domenichino's child acts in a manner appropriate to his young age; moreover, he is restrained by his properly respectful mother. For Domenichino, death was a dignified matter.”

I am intrigued by this, but also I am somewhat frightened and shocked by the fact that the article was published only a decade ago at an institution such as the University Of Chicago. It is yet another example of what it means to not pay the price of admission, to refuse being a Picasso (see 4.4 Picasso's Failure) as in everyone's clown and entertainer, society's humble servant and obeyer of rules.

What Caravaggio did was create a precedent so potent that it impacted everyone who followed his example. In Shawe-Taylor's *Elsheimer's' Mocking of Caravaggio*⁶⁶, the author describes what it was like to follow in Caravaggio's footsteps. He writes: “One of the most common patterns to be observed in the careers of seventeenth-century artists is a flirtation with the influence of Caravaggio followed by a rejection; the former enthusiastic and the latter reluctant. (1991:207)”

Contrary to others who made the sacrifice of entertaining the public by admitting to personal failures in exchange for professional credibility, Caravaggio remained a disobeyer of rules. What society deemed due was not received. The price of admission to the guild of geniuses — obeying the rules of church, culture and society — was never paid. Contrary to van Gogh, who paid the price by descending into madness (the madman can not be judged for his wrongdoings), Caravaggio lived by his own rules. The gift is still due, which is why Caravaggio remained a talented villain rather than a recognised genius for many centuries after his passing. Or in Bellori's own words: “Just as certain herbs produce both beneficial medicine and most pernicious poison, in the same way, though he produced some good, Caravaggio has been most harmful and wrought havoc with every ornament and good tradition of painting. (2011:7)”

In fact, to this day, Caravaggio is still listed as “artist and a criminal” in various encyclopedias, including Encyclopedia Britannica.⁶⁷

4.3 Artemisia The Raped

"In the limelight of gender studies, Artemisia has been resurrected from obscurity as an artistic amazon, a heroine of resistance to patriarchy, a potent woman whose work recognizes and lauds her own kind. Ironically, much of Artemisia's reputation now, as in past centuries, still rests less on her accomplishments than on an adolescent misfortune."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Shawe-Taylor, Desmond. "Elsheimer's' Mocking of Caravaggio'." *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 54.H. 2 (1991): 207-219.

⁶⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica: 2021 accessed July 2021: www.britannica.com/biography/Caravaggio/Successful-artist-and-criminal.

⁶⁸ Cohen, Elizabeth S. "The trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: a rape as history." *Sixteenth Century Journal* (2000): 47-75.

Artemisia Gentileschi lived between 1593 and circa 1656, was a contemporary of Caravaggio and recognised as a true genius. But as my ill informed highschool art history teacher used to say: "too bad she was a woman with a past".

With dramatic objects, vivid colors, and the contrasting lights and darks typical of Caravaggio's baroque school, her paintings have remained at the centre of what constitutes baroque art. Despite her undisputable talent, Artemisia Gentileschi has remained in the shadows until recently.

As Elisabeth Cohen states in *The trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: a rape as history* (2000:48):

"Combining irresistibly sex, violence, and genius, like the story of Heloise and Abelard, the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi has been retold many times. So often, indeed, and with such relish that this episode overshadows much discussion of the painter and has come to distort our vision of her."

Although Cohen blames this "distorting preoccupation with Artemisia's sexual experience" on a "poor sense of history", I regard Gentileschi's art historical fate as a part of a larger picture.

Artemisia Gentileschi was raped by a colleague and friend of her father's, another painter, Agostino Tassi. This happened when Artemisia was in her late teens, probably around fifteen years of age. Nearly a year later, Artemisia and her father, Orazio, initiated a prosecution against Tassi. Extensive records of the trial survive and the story has been retold many times. As Cohen explains, the story about her rape is told and retold 'so often and with such relish that this episode overshadows much discussion of the painter and has come to distort our vision of her. In the past as well as in the recent renewal of interest in Artemisia, biographers and critics have had trouble seeing beyond the rape."

According to Cohen, "the old-fashioned notion that women are defined essentially by their sexual histories continues to reign" in the case of Gentileschi, "as if a girl who suffers assault must be understood as thereafter a primarily sexual creature". "Not only did Artemisia Gentileschi suffer sexual violence in the past, but also, because of these judicial documents, her reputation continues to be violated in the present by an overly sexualized interpretation."

But it is not only about the actual rape; the mere improbability of this trial happening, the details of her interrogation and the fact that Tassi was actually convicted for her rape, made this a very compelling story to tell. But Cohen is right, Gentileschi's groundbreaking work has been overshadowed by her rape and trial.

"The distorting preoccupation with Artemisia's sexual experience derives in considerable part from a poor sense of history. Before explaining much of the painter's work by referring to a single incident in her life, even a plausibly traumatic one, scholars should examine very carefully what happened and especially what these events might have meant in the context of their own culture. The rape must be read as history! (2000:47)"

Cohen identifies two kinds of "false steps that have led astray much of the writing about Artemisia": a weak historical method in deciphering the documentary record; and using modern ideas about psychology and sexuality when mapping said psychology and sexuality onto people distant in the past.

Let us start with these two events: the rape and the trial.

In 1605, the artist Orazio Gentileschi's wife died, leaving him four children, including Artemisia who was the oldest and his only daughter (she was twelve-years-old at the time). Following a then common practice, Orazio taught his children the family craft. (Not all daughters were trained in the arts in the sixteenth- and seventeenth century but those who were received their education at

home⁶⁹). Artemisia's talent was obvious from the beginning, so much so that her father decided to find her a tutor. Around 1611, Orazio shared a circle of friends with Agostino Tassi who was evidently an engaging companion. He managed to quickly ingratiate himself with the Gentileschi family, including Artemisia. According to trial documents, Tassi flirted with Artemisia and then forced her to have sexual intercourse with him. She resisted and protested adamantly whenever she could and was released from his weight. To mollify her, Tassi promised to marry her. She accepted this commitment but he did not honor his commitment. After nine or so months, Orazio launched a prosecution against Tassi "for conspiring to deflower his daughter" (2000:49).

The trial lasted for seven long months. During the trial, Artemisia was questioned and tortured with thumbscrews to verify her testimony⁷⁰. It is mentioned in the trial documents that while listening to other testimonies, torturers appointed by the court were "adjusting the thumbscrews around Artemisia's fingers".

Tassi was sentenced but managed to evade punishment.

Almost immediately after the trial, Artemisia married a painter and in 1613 the couple moved to Florence where Artemisia emerged as an artist in her own right. As Cohen states, Artemisia "proved successful not only in the technicalities of her craft, but also in the necessary business of pleasing patrons and finding commissions" (2000:50).

Since her death, sexuality has been central to Artemisia Gentileschi's reputation. According to Cohen, "this carnal legend has three sources: (a) the record of the rape trial, (b) the tradition of writing about Artemisia, and (c) her paintings, especially their themes and bodily sensuality."

If we look at the writing about Artemisia, it is sufficient to say that it failed as history in the two ways pointed out by Cohen. First, there is a certain sexual notoriety ascribed to her that has very little basis in written texts. Secondly, more recent writings about her, while also highlighting her sexuality, "endow it with twentieth-century psychology and gender-consciousness" (2000:51). There is no grave sexual blemish in the documents about Artemisia's life. What was written in the trial transcripts is mostly opinions by men commenting on her virginity and conduct.

In her article *Reconstructing Artemisia: twentieth-century images of a woman artist*, Laura Benedetti writes:

"Once we acknowledge, as we must, that Artemisia Gentileschi's early pictures are vehicles of personal experience to an extraordinary degree, we can trace the progress of her experience, as the victim first of sexual intimidation, and then of rape—two phases of a continuous sequence that find their pictorial counterparts in the Pommersfelden *Susanna* (1619) and the Uffizi (c.1612-13) respectively."

Benedetti's interpretation of *Gentileschi's Susanna And The Elders* as an image full of links to her victimhood is just one example of how most of the painter's work is analysed. For centuries, art historians and art lovers alike have made this connection. But Cohen is right about one thing—the habit of looking for post-trauma connotations in all of Gentileschi's art seems to come later, long after her death.

"Gossip about Artemisia, the rape, or the court case, however, did not mean permanent damage. In early modern Rome where slander was rife, people knew enough to enjoy, but also to weigh and discard, casual talk. No other record of public contumely about the rape

⁶⁹ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London:Thames & Hudson, 1990), 83, 87, 104-5, 122

⁷⁰ Benedetti, Laura. "Reconstructing Artemisia: twentieth-century images of a woman artist." *Comparative Literature* 51.1 (1999): 42-61.

has been found. Neither routine gossip nor the trial itself prove Artemisia's irrevocably sullied honor (2000:51)”



Susanna and the Elders (1610) by Artemisia Gentileschi
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

Although not much was written about her⁷¹, judging by documents from her time, publicity about the artists depicts her as a respectable and much admired professional who was not only talented but also very capable of managing her art practice as a savvy business woman. As Cohen points out: “Without clear roots in Artemisia's lifetime, the later growth of the legend of her sexual celebrity is obscure. Between her death and the twentieth century, she received little written coverage.” It seems that the timing of her misrepresentation overlaps with what Parker and Pollock describe as a massive erasure of female artists from art history⁷². As mentioned in Chapter 3, twentieth century art historians had a sufficient enough number of sources that confirmed the existence of female artists prior to their modern times. Yet they chose to be silent about them. Popular art history works such as E.H. Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1961) and H.W. Janson's *History of Art* (1962) do not mention any female artists at all while Elisabeth Ellet's *Women Artists In All Ages And Countries* (1859), Ellen Clayton's *English Female Artists* (1876),

Walter Sparrow's *Women Painters Of The World* (1905), and Clara Clement's *Women In The Fine Arts From The 7th Century BC To The 20th Century* (1904) contain over thousand entries on female artists each.

We can argue if being misrepresented as a rape victim first and a significant artist second is better or worse than being completely erased from art history. As we all know, most female artists did not make it into the art history books. But in the case of Artemisia Gentileschi it was both. For centuries, Artemisia's paintings were mistaken for her father Orazio's⁷³. She was also known as a

⁷¹ Cohen, Elizabeth S. "The trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: a rape as history." *Sixteenth Century Journal* (2000): 47-75. "Female artists, in general, have gotten short shrift. In collected lives of artists, for example, portraits of women are few, and those are scant on information about professional achievements and long on stereotypes that emphasize strength or weakness of moral character."

⁷² Parker, Rozsika, Griselda Pollock, and Rozsika Parker. *Old mistresses: Women, art and ideology*. London: Pandora, 1981.

⁷³ Spear, Richard E. "Artemisia Gentileschi: Ten years of fact and fiction." *The Art Bulletin* 82.3 (2000): 568.

'still life painter'⁷⁴ for more than three centuries after her death. In *Artemisia Gentileschi-painter of still lifes?* Bissell writes: "Trusting what he took to be reliable information from Roman sources, the seventeenth century Florentine Filippo Baldinucci extolled Artemisia Gentileschi's skill in the rendering of fruit from nature ("ebbe costei un altro bel talento, che fu di ritrarne al naturale ogni sorte di frutti") (2013:29)."

As Bissell points out, it is all due to Baldinucci's account being "embraced by scholars, pointing to modest still-life elements in autograph pictures by Gentileschi and ascribing to her paintings (to varying degrees, questionably her work) that contain such details (2013:27)."

"It is primarily because the issue of Artemisia Gentileschi as a still-life painter has reentered scholarly literature and because it and Baldinucci's story, irrespective of Costa's publication, have occasioned and are likely to occasion undocumented attributions of still lifes to Artemisia and, thus, skew our understanding of her true achievement..."

In the hands of late twentieth-century scholars, Artemisia's fortune seems to turn. "The several hundred years of deep obscurity were broken", Cohen writes (2000:52). In 1916 she appeared in a respectful to her work article by Roberto Longhi, and after 1950, she was mentioned in a slowly gathering wave of publications. Before that, Artemisia would often appear as a footnote or a 'slightly salacious sidebar' to discussions of her father Orazio or her rapist Tassi. Later, she figured in feminist-spirited anthologies of recovered women artists, but in the last ten or so years, Artemisia has emerged on her own as the focus of exhibitions and large, interpretive studies that have enriched and corrected our knowledge of her life.

"The impact of the whole chain of events on Artemisia's psyche, her sense of self, and her work is more difficult to assess", Cohen writes. "Recent art historical interpretation has been struck by the strength of her female figures, the forcefulness of her women's resistance to men and, sometimes, the general bodiliness in her painting (2000:76)." It is not unusual that explanations of these achievements more than often cite the event of her rape, "as if the assault transformed her consciousness; thereafter, she must have understood women as defined generically by their sexual vulnerability to a male enemy and as empowered to resist". Cohen admits that this interpretation of Artemisia's work "appeals strongly to feminists in search of their foremothers". "But could this rather broad and abstract formulation be conceived by an isolated young Roman woman who said she read poorly?" Cohen asks. The answer is, of course, probably not.

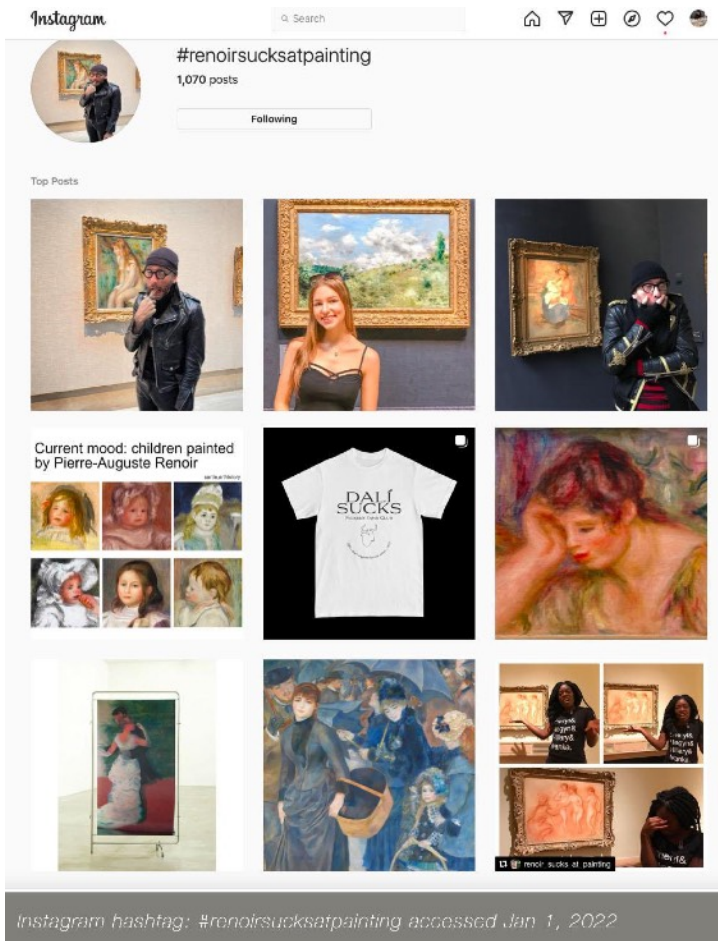
What makes Artemisia Gentilechi so interesting in the debate of artist versus oeuvre, is that her "gift" / her price of admission into the guild of geni is manyfold. She was a strong woman⁷⁵. She painted some stunning images of powerful women in a field where very few women survived as professionals. She managed to build a respectable career by combining skills in handling the brush but also in cajoling patrons. She raised at least one child as a single mother and "both on canvas and in the marketplace of social relations, she prospered (2000:74)". Nevertheless, long before her talent was recognised, it was the rape and trial feeding the public's hunger for spectacle, alongside the (mis)interpretation of her ideas as feminist centuries after her death, that led to her place in art history.

⁷⁴ Bissell, R. Ward. "Artemisia Gentileschi: Painter of Still Lifes?." *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 32.2 (2013): 27-34.

⁷⁵ Treves, Letizia, et al. *Artemisia*. National Gallery Company, 2020.

4.4 Renoir “Sucks At Painting”

I discovered the Instagram phenomenon “Renoir sucks at painting” (as of Jan 1st 2022, the hashtag *#renoirsucksatpainting* has countless followers and more than a thousand posts) early last year (2021) when I accidentally landed on a thread featuring one of the posts featured under the hashtag.



The over thousand posts marked *#renoirsucksatpainting* are almost identical in their intent. Apart from a few t-shirt images and memes, almost all of the posts depict one or more individuals grimacing, as if nauseous, in front of a Renoir painting.

Apart from the hashtag, there is also the account *@renoir_sucks_at_painting* which has more than sixteen thousand followers. The content there is similar to the hashtag, but it has a more political tone of voice. The account holder’s bio reads: “anti-colonial feminist art docents leading you on the Long March through our cultural institutions. Boycott #treacle and all wack, craven mediocrity.”

Renoir Sucks At Painting is no small matter. In 2015, a group organised under the hashtag, protested at *Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts*, demanding the removal of Renoir’s paintings from “all galleries and museums”. This “new movement” has one central complaint: Pierre-Auguste Renoir - the French

impressionist – was a terrible artist, and his paintings should be removed from museums.

The group, led by organizer Max Geller, held signs that said “ReNOir”, “Take’ em down! Renoir Sucks” and “God Hates Renoir”, and demanded that the museum remove Renoir paintings – of which there are many, including the famous *Dance at Boufival*, 1883 – from its walls. At that point in time, Geller’s account had just over two and a half thousand followers. By the time I discovered it, the followers were over sixteen thousand.

When Gajanan, a journalist from the English paper *The Guardian*, asked why Geller dislikes Renoir so much, he replied: “Why do so many people think he’s good? Have you looked at his paintings? “In real life, trees are beautiful. If you take Renoir’s word for it, you’d think trees are just a collection of green squiggles,”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Cajanan, Mahita: Renoir Sucks At Painting movement demands removal of artist’s work. Published 2015, accessed Jan 2022. Internet Source (url: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/06/renoir-sucks-at-painting-protest-boston-max-geller>)

Geller continued: “Renoir is considered a good painter because his work is featured in museums. But upon further inspections of his paintings, that line of argument seems pretty fallacious”.



Dance at Boulogne by Renoir, 1883
Image Source: Wikipedia

When the group in 2015 started gaining followers, it caught the eye of Genevieve Renoir - the painter's great-great-granddaughter. In one photo, Genevieve commented: “When your great-great-grandfather paints anything worth \$78.1m dollars ... then you can criticize. In the meantime, it is safe to say that the free market has spoken and Renoir did not suck at painting.”

I find Genevieve's comment interesting. She used her great-great-grandfather's work's monetary value as an argument for his greatness in a context where his painting skills were questioned. In an artworld where monetary value is how success is defined, the high monetary value of something can indeed be seen as recognition of greatness.

Upon seeing Genevieve Renoir's comment⁷⁷, Geller was quick to reply. He turned her comment into its own post on the account and stated: “I think that is one of the most absurd and insane arguments for anything, the idea that we should let the free market dictate quality.”

He added a list of items on his Instagram account “that have been unleashed upon us by the free market”, and, like Renoir, “decidedly suck”, including “climate change, the prison industrial complex, slavery, settler colonialism, the destruction of sea otter habitats and TV commercials.”

As Geller explained to The Guardian, he felt “pretty agnostic” toward other artists, but hating Renoir is “his

movement's main passion”. He also said that every other painting at the *Museum of Fine Arts* is “overwhelmingly beautiful” and suggested that the museum replace its Renoir collection with work that reflects more diversity rather than “just white males and their white male gaze”.

There is a lot to be said about the choices Renoir made in his paintings. I remember looking at his work as a child wondering why it was considered so great. To me, his work seemed full of mistakes that I myself was reprimanded for in the past. He was praised for his “vibrant” choice of colour and yet his palette seemed disturbingly muddy to me. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it made me nauseous at times. I rejected it in the same way I would reject gray food. Underneath their skin, his figures had no bones or muscles, they seemed bloated and sickening to me. I remember thinking that he must have seen nothing but ugliness in his models.

But Renoir's painting skills are not the only thing under fire in recent times.

In an article in the *New Yorker* published in 2019, titled: *Renoir's Problematic Nudes*⁷⁸Peter Schjeldahl discusses Renoir and the recent sexist stamp placed on the painter and his legacy.

⁷⁷ Post URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/2lkztQIUqK/?taken-by=renoir_sucks_at_painting

⁷⁸ Schjeldahl, Peter: *Renoir's Problematic Nudes*, published Aug 2019, accessed Sept 2020. Internet Source: (url: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/26/renoirs-problem-nudes>)

Who doesn't have a problem with Pierre-Auguste Renoir?, Schjeldahl asks. The article is a review of "a tremendously engaging show that centers on the painter's prodigious output of female nudes" at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The show is titled: *Renoir: The Body, the Senses* and, according to Schjeldahl, it "sparks a sense of crisis".

The reputation of this "once exalted, still unshakably canonical, Impressionist" has fallen, Schjeldahl writes. And it is not so much the "sugary" (a kinder way of saying "kitschy" and "tasteless") painting style of Renoir that the show exposes, but the more burning issue of his acute misogyny.

"Never mind the affront to latter-day educated tastes of a painting style so sugary that it imperils your mind's incisors; there's a more burning issue. The art historian Martha Lucy, writing in the show's gorgeous catalogue, notes that, "in contemporary discourse," the name Renoir has "come to stand for 'sexist male artist."

Renoir took such presumptuous, slavering joy in looking at naked women—who in his paintings were always creamy or biscuit white, often with strawberry accents, and ideally blond—that, Lucy goes on to argue, the tactility of the later nudes, with brushstrokes like roving fingers, unsettles any kind of gaze, including the male. I'll endorse that, for what it's worth."

"Renoir's women strum no erotic nerves in me", the author admits. "There's no beholding distance from their monotonously compact, rounded breasts and thunderous thighs, smushed into depthless landscapes and interiors, and thus no imaginable approach to intimacy." He continues: "Their faces nearly always look, not to put too fine a point on it, dumb—bearing out Renoir's indifference to the women as individuals with inner lives."

It is interesting how, according to the standards upheld by art history - a field which values the refreshment of traditions by way of radical departures from them - Renoir is still very much a recognised genius.

When an artist's legacy is under fire, questions hang in the air. What were Renoir's notable artistic accomplishments? And more importantly: Was Renoir rewarded with greatness for mere participation in founding the impressionist movement?

Renoir was born in a family of artisans⁷⁹. Aged 13, the family apprenticed him to work in a porcelain factory. There he learned to decorate porcelain plate sets with flowers. After that, he moved onto painting cloth panels representing religious themes for missionaries to hang on the walls of their private quarters and churches. He took pleasure in his work and was soon convinced that he should study painting. In 1862, he decided to take evening courses in drawing and anatomy at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. He also took painting lessons at the studio of Charles Gleyre, a Swiss painter who had been a student of the 19th-century Neoclassical painter Ingres". The academic style of Ingres and Greyre did not suit Renoir although he knew he needed to acquire at least the elementary skills needed to become a painter.

At Greyre's studio Renoir met Sisley, Monet, and Bazille, three other students who shared a desire for "art that was free from past traditions". In another studio at the *Académie Suisse*, two other young artists, Paul Cézanne and Camille Pissarro, were having similar issues as Renoir and his three friends. The six artists started meeting frequently.

"Conditions were ripe for the birth of a new pictorial language, and Impressionism, bursting upon the scene, attracted notoriety with the first Impressionist exposition of 1874,

⁷⁹ Cogniat Raymond, Britannica, published 2021, accessed in Jan 2022. Source (url: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-Auguste-Renoir>).

held independently of the official Salon. It took 10 years for the movement to acquire its definitive form, its independent vision, and its unique perceptiveness. But one can point to 1874 as the year of departure for the movement that subsequently spawned modern art. (2021)”

Although the six friends worked hard striving to produce “light-suffused paintings from which black was excluded”, their pursuits led to disappointments. Being quite divergent from traditional norms, their paintings were frequently rejected and were “extremely difficult to sell” (2021).

While his friends were mostly interested in painting landscapes, Renoir seemed more interested in the human figure. Because of that, he stood out among the other artists in the group and managed to obtain several orders for portraits. Among the people he received commissions from was Georges Carpenter - a member of upper-middle class society. In 1889, Carpenter decided to organise an exhibit featuring Renoir’s work at gallery La Vie Moderne.

But Impressionism wore thin on Renoir, according to records. He “became convinced that the systematic use of the Impressionistic technique was no longer sufficient for him and that small brushstrokes of contrasting colours placed side by side did not allow him to convey the satiny effects of the skin” (2021). He also questioned the rejection of black paint among his comrades. His position on black was that it could be used to accentuate the other colours. During his journey to Italy, he discovered Raphael and the hallmarks of classicism. From that point on, black paint was back and the clear lines typical of Raphael’s visual language made an appearance in Renoir’s paintings.

“Most of his works executed from 1883 to 1884 on are so marked by a new discipline that art historians have grouped them under the title the “Ingres” period (to signify their vague similarity to Ingres’s techniques) or the “harsh,” or “dry,” period. Renoir’s experiments with Impressionism were not wasted, however, because he retained a luminous palette. (2021)”



Seated Bather by Renoir, 1914
Image Source: Wikipedia

Renoir had his first attack of rheumatism in 1894. As the attacks became more and more frequent, he spent more and more time in the south of France, where the climate was more suitable for someone with rheumatism. In 1907, he settled in the small village of Cagnes, buying the estate of Les Collettes, where he spent the rest of his life. Although his infirmity “became more and more constraining”, Renoir never ceased to paint. (2021)

A painting often discussed at the art college I intended at 13, was *Seated Bather* (1914). A poster of the painting was also taped to a door leading to the toilet facilities in order to “discourage students from doodling” on the wooden door “because paint’s not cheap”. Interestingly enough, this same painting is frequently shown on Instagram with people grimacing in front of it, pretending to be nauseous. Renoir often said that he “did not enjoy” his drawing, painting and anatomy courses, and was often frustrated because of that. He did not see the need for them as his plan was “to paint with light”. The question on many people’s lips seems to be: Did he succeed in painting with light?

Or did his lack of motivation to learn the basics of drawing and painting cause some serious artistic failure?

These are not questions that I, or anyone else for that matter, could easily answer.

Returning to the event of the Clark show mentioned above, the curators Esther Bell and George T. M. Shackelford strove to demonstrate Renoir's place in French painting of the nude "by interpolating opposite works by such predecessors as Boucher, Corot, and, especially, Courbet" (2019). When it comes to the choice of subject matter, the most notable comparison here may be the one between the work of Renoir and Picasso.

"Picasso adored and collected Renoir nudes, the more outrageous the better. I think that he responded to something about Renoir that he also found in the consummate religiosity of El Greco and in the hieratic integrity of African sculpture: downright, forthright art, uncompromised by social niceties and free of apologetic irony... (2019)".

Esther Bell makes clear that the curator's intent was not to discredit Renoir as a painter but to reaffirm his "rightful" place in art history. "Everything in Renoir that is hard to take and almost impossible to think about, because it makes no concessions to intelligence, affirms his stature as a revolutionary artist", Schjeldahl writes. According to him, Renoir's contribution lies in the fact that he "stood firmly against the past in art and issued a stark challenge to its future".

"You can't dethrone him without throwing overboard the fundamental logic of modernism as a sequence of jolting aesthetic breakthroughs, entitled to special rank on the grounds of originality and influence. The more politicized precincts of the present artworld are bent on just such a purge, and it's hard to contest their point by sticking up for Renoir's only too confident, even embarrassing, panache. But there's no gainsaying his historic significance. (2019)"

This said, Schjeldahl's statement that you cannot question Renoir without questioning the logic of Modernism, makes me think that it may be time to question Modernism and the ideas that gave it legitimacy, especially the backlash against the emancipation of women and the Suffragette movement in the beginning of the 20th century, thoroughly documented by Pollock and Parker in their book *Old Mistresses* (1981). This backlash was central to Modernism and the making of artists like Renoir, Degas, Gauguin and Picasso.

4.5 Picasso's Failure

"There is no running away from Picasso. I know that. I have never succeeded. But when I had my breakdown, I still hadn't realized this."⁸⁰

These are the very potent first lines of a book written by Picasso's own granddaughter - Marina Picasso. There is no way anyone could possibly misunderstand the connection she makes between her mental breakdown, described with meticulous attention to detail in the first pages of her book, to the man that was her grandfather. "Picasso's quest for the absolute entailed an implacable will to power", Marina writes. "His extraordinary work demanded human sacrifices. He engulfed anyone who got near him, and drove them to despair. No one in my family managed to escape his stranglehold."

⁸⁰ Picasso, Marina. *Picasso: My Grandfather*. Random House, 2010.

Marina's book is a dark tale in which her infamous grandfather is described as the poisonous spider in a very complex net of depression, suicidal behaviour and utter misery, all stemming from the spider in the center - Picasso. Throughout her book, she makes clear that Picasso did not hide the fact that he enjoyed having a devastating effect on his family. This is what makes Marina's book particularly dark.

"He needed blood to sign each of his paintings: my father's blood, my brother's, my mother's, my grandmother's, and mine, the blood of all those who loved him - people who thought that they loved a human being, whereas instead they loved Picasso."

The way she describes herself and everyone else in Picasso's family is daunting: "... for we were stillborn descendants of Picasso, trapped in a spiral of mocked hopes," She describes her mother as someone who "might have been a perfectly dignified woman if she hadn't been infected by the Picasso virus".

"Occasionally it was Jacqueline Roque, the future, devoted Madame Picasso, who delivered the sentence: "The Sun does not want to be disturbed". When it wasn't The Sun, it was Monseigneur or the Grand Maitre."

Marina Picasso gives us a glimpse at the way Picasso saw himself.

"An insolent father who only had to sign a paper tablecloth in a restaurant to pay the bill for forty people, who boasted of being able to buy a house without needing a lawyer by handling over three paintings that he haughtily described as "three pieces of crap smeared in the night"."

These words come directly from the lips of Picasso himself. They confirm the image of a life lived in an artworld bubble where artistic value does not matter. In the absence of failure, everything is possible.

A similar story is told by John Berger in a very different way:

"Just after the Second World War Picasso bought a house in the South of France and paid for it with one still-life. Picasso has now in fact transcended the need for money. Whatever he wishes to own, he can acquire by drawing it. The truth has become a little like the fable of Midas."

This is considered to be a so-called "inspirational quote" by many. As a meme⁸¹, these words were shared more than 23.000 times on social media in 2020-2021, according to the site *Giphy*.

"I don't want to speak ill of Picasso. I just want to try and explain my long uphill struggle to rehabilitate the image of a man who was incapable of love. I'd like to make our suffering palpable. The Picasso virus to which we fell victim was subtle and undetectable."

She continues:

"It was not necessarily Picasso who passed this judgement. It was also the people who granted my grandfather power, who glorified him, and raised him to the level of God: the experts, art historians, curators, critics, not to mention courtiers, parasites, bootlickers who were so impressed by what my father could do so effortlessly that they fantasized about him. They didn't care if my grandfather was happy or unhappy, the only thing that mattered was his power, his empire, and the wealth he represented. To them he was a showman."

⁸¹ Meme - an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations.

Maybe this was Picasso's sacrifice and the gift he made to society in exchange for fame and riches - his soul. Nobody cared about him as a human being because, not unlike a madman, he was a 'showman' who entertained for everyone's amusement.

"Everything revolved around him; he coloured all her thoughts. He was her only subject of conversation - with shopkeepers and with people she met on the street, even when she didn't know them. "I'm Picasso's daughter-in-law." It was like a trophy, a special permit, an excuse for any eccentricity."

Reading about Picasso's daughter-in-law's relationship to the painter and Marina's accounts of the other relationships in Picasso's inner circle (if we can call it that), begs a comparison. Picasso's eccentricity is not unlike Van Gogh's madness - it is a permission to act in an unconventional manner given to the master and everyone connected to him by association, never by proxy. No questions asked or apologies needed.

The question Marina Picasso is indirectly asking in her book: *Can a man incapable of love create true art?*

When I first started doing research for this dissertation, I did one of those things that a first year student would do - I opened Google and searched for "Picasso and failure". Anyone who has ever done that at some point in time, would undoubtedly have stumbled upon a book by John Berger titled: *The success and failure of Picasso*⁸² It is a much debated book as many have opposed and continue to oppose and enthusiastically criticize its contents.

One of the scholars with strong opinions about Berger's book is Elisabeth Cohen. She calls it "one of the most fascinating and irritating books yet written on Picasso"⁸³. It is "fascinating" to her because she finds some of the author's ideas "highly original and stimulating". She describes the book as "beautifully written" and the author's intentions "praiseworthy". This said, the book is also "irritating" as Cohen finds the author failing to live up to his original and stimulating ideas. Why? Because of Berger's way of interpreting the visual arts "in their social, economic, political and ideological context". She finds John Berger not sufficiently equipped for the task. According to her, he comes to the conclusions first and then traces backwards to what led him to make the conclusions in question - a method that may necessitate some distortion of events "to fit" his conclusion. She gives several examples of such "contentions":

"Today it is Picasso's wealth which serves to increase his reputation, and not his art. Moreover the publicity surrounding the man has put his art in the shade. This is reinforced by Picasso's statement: "It is not what the artist does that counts, but what he is", quoted out of context from what Picasso said to Zervos in 1935 (2000:479)."

Cohen's point here is that the above statement should be interpreted as an "enrichment of his relationship to works of art and not a limitation, as Berger has it". What Picasso meant was that he is "fascinated by the intellectual anxiety of Cezanne and the emotional torments of Van Gogh as reflected in their work, and not in the works per se (2000:479)." To me, it sounds like Cohen is making assumptions in the same way that Berger does.

Another "contention", Cohen suggests, is that Berger refers to a "typical dualism of the bourgeois attitude to art - on the one hand the glory and mystery of genius, on the other hand the work of art as a saleable commodity". This can be said about most of the works from the Renaissance era and yet Berger's belief here is that Picasso's work is "dominated by the ambiguity of being at once an avant-gardiste and a romantic believing above all in genius, a romantic illusion preserved

⁸² Berger, John, and Joseph Berger. *The success and failure of Picasso*. Vol. 2383. Vintage, 1965.

⁸³ Révai, Andrew. 'success and Failure of Picasso.' (1967): 479-481.

by the bourgeois attitude to art." This is backed up by "homages" that Cohen finds 'sickening" (2000:480).

A different contention that Cohen discusses is the emphasis put on Picasso being a child prodigy. Berger's conclusion here seems to be that Picasso, elevating the role that inborn talent plays into success in contrast to failure, "denies the power of reason". This conclusion is exemplified by something Picasso said in 1923, namely: "In my opinion to search means nothing in painting. To find is the thing." Berger questions Picasso's attitude and argues that 'surely this is most arguable if applied to one of the inventors of Cubism, inspired above all by reason and intellect?" Cohen finds the negative aspect of Berger's statement "unacceptable", and argues that not only did Picasso invent Cubism but also influenced "practically all avant-garde trends of the first half of the century, including Expressionism and Surrealism".

When it comes to Cubism, Cohen finds Berger's analysis in terms of dialectic materialism "fascinating". Berger sees Cubism as "the outcome of Courbet's materialism and Cezanne's method of looking at nature". Also, given the choice of subject-matter and new materials and new techniques used, Berger points out that Cubism can be seen as a way to express modernity. According to Cohen, this is one of the most stimulating passages in the book "in spite of some over-simplifications". Berger makes "a wealth of parallels of political, social, economic and scientific phenomena" of the period between 1900 and 1914. In Cohen's critique, Berger is missing the point, the point being that:

"...although the cubist painters were not necessarily conscious of the transformation of this period, they believed in progress per se and felt their way, picture by picture, towards a new synthesis which, in terms of painting, was the philosophical equivalent of the revolution that was taking place in scientific thinking: a revolution which was also dependent on the new materials and the new means of production (2000:479)".

Berger admits that Picasso was the leader of that particular group of forward thinkers but makes a point in saying that it was rather Picasso's contemporaries and friends Apollinaire, Braque, and Gris who "sensed the historical convergence which made Cubism possible". It was Apollinaire, Braque, and Gris who, rather than Picasso, belonged and were committed to the modern world.

Picasso's lack of concern in the 1914-18 war is something that Berger finds disruptive of the common view of Picasso as an affluent pioneer of political art. Berger illustrates Picasso's isolation from world events by referring to Parade and his association with Cocteau and Diaghilev.

"This choice of Parade as the central theme of Picasso's work during the first war is an example of his method of picking his premises at random in order to fit his conclusions. He ignores Picasso's synthetic Cubism, and also his associations with Dada in Zurich, with its anarchistic and pacifistic undertones. (2000:480)"

In Berger's view, by the time he entered his so-called "classicist period"⁸⁴ when his paintings "became a pastiche, if not a caricature, of Ingres, Poussin, and Classicism", Picasso's decline was a fact. The "self-conscious division between their form and content" was a proof of this decline, Berger states.

In conclusion, Berger argues that this commonly held, overly romanticized view of Picasso as "a lonely romantic", is an artificial one. And it is this conception of the lonely romantic which brings Berger to the second theme of his book, the assertion that Picasso has indeed "run out of substance (2000:480)".

⁸⁴ Picasso's classical years: 1917-1923



Pablo Picasso, 1921, *Nous autres musiciens (Three Musicians)*
Source: Wikipedia

Taking onboard Cohen's and Berger's reasoning but also research done by scholars such as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock who examined Picasso's and other modern artists' contribution to the elimination of women from art history⁸⁵ I could not help but examine my own relationship with Picasso's legacy. Truth is, I have never in my life regarded Picasso as a genius. Throughout my art school years, I would get in verbal fights with every person (including most teachers) who dared mention his name. For some reason, I made it my mission to "educate the ignorant" regarding Picasso's actual contribution to culture (which I firmly believed was negative rather than positive) and that continued even later in life. In the initial stages of my research for this paper, I made a conscious decision (or so I thought) to exclude Picasso from all my reasoning, mainly because I did

not trust my judgement in regards to him and his legacy. Later on, I came to the realization that I would have to address this man sooner or later and my decision to exclude him was not based on fear of bias but rather on my awareness of the necessity to examine my attitude towards him and do a lot more research than my initial plans entailed. Frankly, it did not feel great but had to be done in the name of honest truth seeking.

The fact that Picasso was a child prodigy does play into the impact his legacy has had on modern art history, I believe. Like many of the geniuses that preceded him (Dürer, Da Vinci, Michelangelo and, of course, Mozart, to name a few) being a child prodigy gifted Picasso with an excellent start in the area of myth-making. Needless to say, there are two sides to that medal. Early awareness of being 'special' can make one arrogant, which many claim is exactly what happened with Picasso. To some of his contemporaries, legendary film-maker and pioneer surrealist Luis Buñuel for example, this arrogance 'suffocated' Picasso's talent and even "destroyed" his art later in life⁸⁶.

When it comes to my relationship with Picasso's legacy, my distaste regarding everything Picasso has little to do with his art and everything to do with his leading role in the normalisation of the male gaze. The "male gaze" is a term coined by Laura Mulvey - a feminist film theorist best known for her essay on *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*⁸⁷. Her theories were influenced by the likes of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. She is predominantly known for her theory regarding sexual objectification of women in the media (the above mentioned "Male Gaze" theory). Mulvey

⁸⁵ Parker, Rozsika, and Griselda Pollock. *Old mistresses: Women, art and ideology*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

⁸⁶ Buñuel, Luis. *Mi último suspiro*. Taurus, 2018.

⁸⁷ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1989. 14-26.

was able to interpret the "primordial wish for pleasurable looking" satisfied through the cinematic experience. As a way of seeing women and the world, psychoanalytic theorizations of the male gaze involve Freudian and Lacanian concepts such as scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking.

I grew up with said male gaze and it nearly destroyed my desire to express myself as an artist. Regardless of my need to remain as objective as possible in my research, I will never be comfortable with the idea of making Picasso the main narrator of our collective art story. He will never speak for me as he never intended to. This was a man who purposefully objectified women in order to diminish my gender's role in society and culture. He famously said "Every time I change wives I should burn the last one. That way I'd be rid of them. They wouldn't be around to complicate my existence. Maybe, that would bring back my youth, too. You kill the woman and you wipe out the past she represents."⁸⁸ Here, it may seem logical to argue that, again in the name of objectivity, a man's opinion of women in his private life should be separated from his legacy as an artist. Although this may be true for other artists, in the case of Picasso, his opinions regarding women mirrored his attitude towards our entire gender, and that attitude became a dominant theme in his art. There are countless examples of how his attitude towards women made Picasso's art somewhat of a textbook example of the male gaze. There are countless references mentioning his depictions of women as illustrative of discourses related to the innate imbalance and chaos that comes with patriarchy.

In an ArtSpace article from 2017⁸⁹, Shannon Lee writes:

"If women truly ran the world, Picasso's Minotaurs might be, from the fore, considered a very detailed psychological account of toxic masculinity. Instead, the series is mostly lauded as an expression of man's virility, power, and vulnerability, culminating in a guilty appeal to our sympathy—Picasso as the self-mythologized (and self-aware) monster, a victim of both himself and of the women he regarded as "either goddesses or doormats," and "machines for suffering." Honestly, these days, it's pretty hard to feel bad for a guy who draws a mythologized version of himself as a "beast" literally raping women on countless occasions."



"Minotaur Caressing a Sleeping Woman" (1933) by Picasso
Image Source: Pinterest.

"And yet", Lee adds, "institutions and critics have continuously normalized and perpetuated an interpretation of Picasso's work in purely academic terms, comparing his work's influence on every other possible male contemporary for the umpteenth time". According to Lee, what she refers to as "the artistic canon" (what I here refer to as "the artworld") has consistently disregarded Picasso's personal tumult with women "in favor of keeping the art separate from the artist". This despite what I have already pointed out regarding Picasso's attitude towards women

⁸⁸ Brink, Andrew. *Desire and Avoidance in Art: Pablo Picasso, Hans Bellmer, Balthus and Joseph Cornell: Psychobiographical Studies with Attachment Theory*. Peter Lang, 2007.

⁸⁹ Lee, Shannon 2017, "The Picasso Problem: Why We Shouldn't Separate the Art From the Artist's Misogyny", ArtSpace, November 22d, accessed June 2021 via ArtSpace / Art & Politics.

and the fact that Picasso himself often said that all his work "could be categorized into seven distinct styles, each one a document of his relationship with the seven women in his life— Fernande Olivier, Eva Gouel, Olga Khokhlova, Marie-Thérèse Walter, Dora Maar, Françoise Gilot, and Jacqueline Roque".

If Picasso himself so persistently and loudly announced the strong tie between his art and his toxic relationships with women, then why on earth should we denounce that tie and separate his art from his misogyny?



The Dreamer by Picasso (1932)
Image Source: Metropolitan Museum Of Art

Lee writes “With the possible exception of Françoise Gilot (of the seven, Gilot was the only one who was able to successfully extrapolate herself from the artist and continue to live an independent life), Picasso created an exceptionally miserable life for just about every woman he claimed to love.” Marie-Thérèse Walter and Jacqueline Roque committed suicide on account of Picasso. Furthermore, when the artist’s grandson Pablito, (Marina’s brother) was not allowed to attend his grandfather’s funeral, he too, ended his life. Jacqueline Roque saw to it that Pablito was turned away in the most public manner. Marina described in detail how Picasso “bled the women in his life dry”: “He submitted them to his animal sexuality, tamed them, bewitched them, ingested them, and crushed them onto his canvas. After he had spent many nights extracting their essence, once they were bled dry, he would dispose of them. (2010:57)”

In her paper *Picasso’s lack of Innovation Compared With Gentileschi: The Duel Of Gentileschi And Picasso*⁹⁰, Gabrielle Selena writes:

“Great artists are defined by their innovative forms and styles. At first glance, Pablo Picasso’s (1881-1973) *The Dreamer* (1932), oil on canvas, is innovative in a formal sense with its change in visual perspective, varying forms, and display of the body. In comparison, Artemisia Gentileschi’s (1593-1653) *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620), oil on canvas, seems to lack innovation in its realistic depiction of human form and use of a biblical story.”

This is only at first glance, as *Selena* points out. Formal innovation comes from innovative ideas expressed through line, form, composition and other visual elements, she continues, while perspective innovation “comes from innovative ideas through the piece’s purpose and its place in society”. Here she argues that great artists must be defined by their formal innovation as well as their perspective innovation. Artists such as *Artemisia Gentileschi* must be recognized as great artists for the perspective innovation shown in paintings like *Judith Slaying Helofernes*. *Pablo*

⁹⁰ Gabrielle, Selena. "Picasso's Lack of Innovation Compared to Gentileschi." 2019



Judith Slaying Holofernes by (Artemisia Gentileschi. Image Source: Wikipedia

Picasso, on the other hand, must be judged for his “relative lack of perspective innovation” shown in the lack of creativity and inspiration in perspective in works such as the above mentioned *The Dreamer*.

According to *Selena* (and I wholeheartedly agree with her analysis), *Gentileschi*’s innovative thinking shines through her choice of perspective which departs from what was at the time (and hundreds of years after her time) traditional female art of landscapes and portraits. Opposing the conventions of her time, *Gentileschi* chose to tell historical and biblical stories. She also “plays with unprecedented power roles by portraying commanding and confident female characters, an unknown practice during the 17th century”, as *Selena* points out.

In comparison *Picasso*’s unique painting style “was inspired by *Paul Cezanne*, practised with *Georges Braque*, and stolen from non-European art”. *Selena* adds: “Unlike *Gentileschi*, he was not inspired by women, but rather he manipulated and abused them in order to capture ideas for his work (2019).”

Even by his own standards, *Picasso* was failing at innovation. As previously mentioned, he bragged about buying a house with “three pieces of crap smeared in the night” referring to the paintings he quickly painted to pay for his estate.

This said, of course it is imperative that *Picasso*’s legacy is understood so that it can be viewed in its rightful context. But, in my research, I have chosen to examine *Picasso* as a phenomenon in the context of artistic failure. And, in the context of artistic failure, so far, in the eyes of the artworld, *Picasso* can do no wrong. Why? Well, if the artworld listened to the voices questioning *Picasso*’s legacy, the inexplicable price level of his art would plummet and others like him would follow in his footsteps. This would inevitably result in the machinery turning the wheels of the artworld choking on itself.

But, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. There is a lot to be said about myth-making.

Chapter 5: History - The Untrustworthy Judge

Throughout history, art has meant different things to different people and every period in history has offered its own answers to the question: What is art?

For many centuries, art was created by a few proclaimed geniuses and countless anonymous others who served an apparatus governed by patrons such as popes, cardinals and other people in a position of power within the Catholic Church, powerful merchant families such as The House of Medici famous for supporting the work of such Renaissance masters as Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, and, of course, the highest in rank - the monarchs.

The idea of art, in the way we understand it today, was formed as recently as three hundred years ago in 17th century Europe. With the onset of Enlightenment, the established systems of ethics, religion and government were questioned by intellectualists seeking a new understanding of the world based on reason, and artists began to explore the idea of art free from the need to moralise, inform or delight.

One man is very much deserving of all the credit he could possibly get in this context - Giorgio Vasari. Vasari was the one who invented the genre of the encyclopedia of artistic biographies with his *Le Vite de" più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* (Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects), which was first published in 1550 and dedicated to Grand Duke Cosimo I de" Medici. After its publication, Vasari's revolutionary book was the model used by everyone who attempted an artist's biography or an arts encyclopedia of any kind. Vasari "confirmed and sought to extend a great rise in the status of artists within the Italian peninsula during the period now known - also largely thanks to Vasari's efforts - as the Renaissance"⁹¹.

Before him, the art profession had been ranked rather low because it involved work with the hands and was thus classified as manual labour. But the impressive more than thousand pages long publication of Vasari's introduced the idea that the greatest artists "deserve to be ranked with poets and philosophers as men of true genius, rightful companions of kings and princes" (2011:7).

As soon as the idea of "art for art's sake" began to take root, a universe of new possibilities emerged as artists gradually became independent thinkers. And with Modernity this independence became art's reason for being as artists began to reject styles of the past and create artworks inspired by modern society.

This new art reflected what was happening in science, technology and culture and not only what they were told to communicate by their patrons or the institutions they were attached to. This, of course, had quite an impact on the various ways in which art was created. Moving images, complex configurations of unspecified materials and more performance oriented art entered the scene. And that happened in parallel with a major shift in the type of topics that were discussed.

One thing that we should always remember is that these changes did not happen overnight. Changing surroundings are always pushing cultural developments in various, often unexpected directions. With the invention of the camera, photography rather than painting became the medium mostly associated with more "truthfully" reflecting reality.

And here we are, in postmodern times.

As An and Cerasi point out in their book "Who's Afraid of Contemporary Art?" (2017)⁹², contrary to what some may believe, Contemporary Art is not entirely "in the now" as in disconnected from its past. It still is very much connected and explorative in regards to its past, and so is its history. The main differentiator lies in the much more expansive nature of today's artworld and the notable broadness of today's art history. "Artistic production is now so diverse, so varied, that any member of tiny movements can be established and disbanded with each new exhibition

⁹¹ Graham-Dixon, Andrew. *Caravaggio: A life sacred and profane*. WW Norton & Company, 2011.

⁹² An, Kyung, and Jessica Cerasi. *Who's Afraid of Contemporary Art?*. Thames & Hudson, 2017.

concept", which may be the reason why "contemporary" has come to stand for "more specific terminology and more defined movements" (2017:14-15).

Simply put, it is more about the issues and in that sense, Contemporary Art is more thematic than temporal. In fact, much of the art in the last three-four decades has been either connected to a particular issue such as feminism, racism, identity, gender identity, AIDS and more, or explorative of the human condition, as a kind of "applied philosophy" (2017:19).

So, how does that special quality of "art-ness", mentioned in previous chapters, relate to Contemporary Art? Maybe, to answer that, we should ask ourselves the question: "How is contemporary art different from other art?"

In the chapter 'so Is It Contemporary?', An and Cerasi discuss the American artist Andre's iconic 1970s artwork "Bricks". It is fascinating that the 1970s row over whether "Bricks" is art or not still lingers. It is usually the case with groundbreaking works such as Duchamp's readymade sculpture of a toilet bowl (1917) titled: Fountain, Barbara Kruger's work, or Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" (1987) which depicts a crucifix drenched in urine.

On studying art and art history, An and Cerasi state that understanding what came before can help students have a better grasp of their own practice but also figure out how to make "their unique contribution" to the field.

In many ways, in the context of Contemporary Art, uniqueness has replaced the ability to follow tradition as the main goal of any aspiring creative professional. But the only way to find unique ways to contribute to the field is by risking failure again and again.

But whether we talk about modern or contemporary art, one question seems to fuel endless debate while always getting in the way of clarity - What makes it art?

In order to find an answer to this question we must recognize the impossibility of an all-encompassing truth in the matter - there is no legitimate definition of art and we must always look at each individual case separately. This said, there are certain clues.

Art is often understood in the context of the readymade versus the handmade - dichotomy as the uniquely crafted, handmade object. And is in the perceived lack of skill involved in much of Contemporary Art that gets people riled. Art is perceived as a master craft - "a skill and dexterity with line and form, refined and honed to be admired" (2017:26).

As An and Cerasi point out, instead of asking: What is art?, a much more interesting question would be: When does something become art?

For example, by placing an everyday object, such as a stack of bricks, in the same room as marble statues or other fine art pieces, one may challenge conventional truths and **change the rules** of the game. When The Tate Gallery purchased Carl Andre's "Equivalent VIII", widely known as "pile of bricks" in 1976, it caused a storm with critics asking why public money had been spent on this 'so called artwork'.

In "Carl Andre: Writer" Meyer talks about another artwork - "The Bricks Abstract" describing it as "a hilarious collection of critical responses to the Tate Gallery's purchase of Andre's sculpture Equivalent VIII in 1976, which quickly devolved into a national scandal (page 283). Here the grid serves as an armature for exhibiting the artist's bad press."⁹³

And more than 40 years later, *Equivalent VIII* still causes excitement among admirers and critics alike. At a recent exhibition of this controversial artwork, Councillor Jean Calvert, lead cabinet

⁹³ Meyer, James. "Carl Andre: Writer." *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004* 12. 1959.

member for health, wellbeing and communities, said: "This sculpture is well known for the huge stir it caused back in the 70s and because of that, people still flock to see what all the fuss was about."⁹⁴

It becomes quite clear that challenging conventional truths will bring interesting ideas to the forefront and grant an artist his or her spot in the limelight. This said, the provocation in itself will not guarantee acceptance to the artworld and confirmation of "art-ness". So, what does? The next question to ask in this context is: *Do I believe it is art?*

An object that challenges the traditional definition of art must be seen as an invitation to view something as art, as more than the sum of its parts, so to speak, in order to be considered as something that could be art.

"At any rate, for virtually anyone working in the artworld, the "Is it art?" question is boring and irrelevant. The real question is *"Is it any good?"* (2017:26)

Take *Piero Manzoni's Artist's Shit* for example. In May 1961, the Italian artist Piero Manzoni packed and sealed ninety cylindrical cans, each containing thirty grams of his own excrement. Atop each tin are the words "Produced By", followed by the artist's signature and a stenciled number designating its place in the run.⁹⁵ After watching several documentaries and reading article after article about *Manzoni's Merda d'artista*, I kept asking myself the same question that *An* and *Cerasi* did: Does it really make a difference if there is shit in the can or if it is empty? (2017, p.28). I dare say: not really. One buys into the illusion and mystique and the perception of the piece as a critique on the absurdity of the art market, or as *An* and *Cerasi* put it: 'same old shit'.

We have already established that something that does not fit the traditional definition of art, as in man-made not readymade objects that display artistic skill and/or challenge our perception of what art is and does, questions conventional truths and invites us to consider it as art, it is still somewhat unclear how we, as viewers, recognise the presence of art-ness.

In his review of De Bolla's book *Art Matters*, *Bozicevic* (2004:403-404) writes:

"Their essential role is further supported by the claim that the "art-component of a work of art" its "art-ness" is located not in the object, in the material presence of the work, but in the recipient's experience. Rejecting formalist theories, requirements that artworks possess some intrinsic properties like harmony, unity, or intensity, de Bolla states that all properties we ascribe to artworks are actually virtual projections of our internal states."⁹⁶

It is clear in this context that these are indeed complex questions and as such cannot be answered in simple terms. Instead of looking for easy answers, we must consider adding even more questions to the mix. One way to do that would be to look at other perspectives than that of an art historian or an artist.

One such perspective is that of the ethnographer.

In their paper *Artworlds and their ethnographers*⁹⁷, published in *Ethnologie française* in 2008, Rothenberg and Fine look at ethnography's relationships with the artworlds they examine in a

⁹⁴ BBC. accessed on September 17th 2011: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-14954711

⁹⁵ Silk, Gerald. "Myths and Meanings in Manzoni's Merda d'artista." *Art Journal* 52.3. 1993: 65-75

⁹⁶ Bozicevic, Vanda. "Art Matters.". 2004: 402-404.

⁹⁷ Rothenberg, Julia, and Gary Alan Fine. "artworlds and their ethnographers." *Ethnologie française* 38.1, 2008: 31-37

different way by asking the question: Where's the Work of Art? In the beginning of their reasoning, there is the issue of the art work itself being "ignored" by ethnographers.

"Most artworld ethnography addresses the social processes that take place in the constellation of networks, institutions, audiences, and reputations [Becker, 1984; Peterson, 1999]. What is for the most part ignored by ethnographers is that which gives meaning to the lives of artworld actors: the work of art."

While the authors acknowledge the importance of defending the knowledge produced by the ethnographer as "distinct from that produced within the field of art", they also recognise that the ethnographer's ability to interpret works of art has a two-fold importance, the first being related to the artist's investment in representation, text, and evaluation and the second being related to the aesthetic experience works of art provoke.

"Like the art critic, the ethnographer's job is interpretation - not just of the art object, but of the entire field. [...] As objects, works of art must be seen as social productions in which social and symbolic processes are carried out. [...] In addition to developing knowledge about and the confidence to discuss the various formal and technical qualities of works of art, ethnographers also need to pay attention to the particular qualities of "aesthetic experience" that works of art provoke in view."

While discussing such artworld phenomena as artists' preoccupation with mass media which raises questions concerning artists' role in a society in which lived experience is so heavily mediated by the culture industry, the authors state that the relative importance granted by such experiences, as well as accounts of the quality of aesthetic experience provided by artists, can, in addition to the actual content of works of art, provide an ethnographer with "important information about shifts within the field and the field's position vis-à-vis other spheres of social interaction". By stating that, Rothenberg and Fine point to the intersection between the artwork's (and the artist's for that matter) sociopolitical context, the artist's role in promoting the intended aesthetic experience and the actual content of an artwork as the "place" where an art work resides.

Another perspective that we may be tempted to examine is that of a contemporary philosopher, In his paper "In defense of artistic value"⁹⁸ published in *Philosophical Quarterly* in 2012, Huddleston asks: Is there a distinctively artistic value that works of art have over and above their aesthetic value?

"No, Dominic McIver Lopes claims in a recent paper. To frame things in terms of the key distinction that Lopes uses, there are many values in art (it can lead to political change, improve our health, and so on). But not all of these are values of art as art. If there is such a properly artistic sort of value, Lopes thinks, then it is simply going to amount to aesthetic value."

5.1 Artist Versus Oeuvre

As Natalie Heinich discusses in her work *The glory of Van Gogh: An anthropology of admiration*⁹⁹, while contemplating over the problematic relationship between the person and their body of work,

⁹⁸ Huddleston, Andrew. "In defense of artistic value." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62.249, 2012: 705-714.

⁹⁹ Heinich, Nathalie. *The glory of Van Gogh: An anthropology of admiration*. Princeton University Press, 1997.

the opposition between the hagiographical veneration of the artist and the critique of religious expectations projected onto art becomes obvious. Simply put, there is an opposition between focusing on the Man and focusing on his Oeuvre. One may also discern a certain homology between these two sets of opposites. In denouncing emphasis on the man, one denounces devotion. At the same time, the tendency to personalise artistic greatness "fits into sanctifying forms of the hagiographical tradition" (1997:63-64).

As Heinrich explains, every celebration of a singular person as a hero comprises two contrasting principles of imputing greatness: a "personalistic" principle, which reduces the action or oeuvre to its author's intrinsic merit; and a principle that could be called "operationalistic". The latter raises the authors up to the level of action or oeuvre that is extrinsic to them. They are, so to speak, merely the occasion for it, its accidental actors, instruments designated from among many other possible candidates.

At one end of the spectrum, personalising the great man makes up in proximity to ordinary values for what has been lost with respect to the specificity of his actions or works. An example of this is the "cult of celebrities" in the tabloid press, which intellectuals willingly stigmatise as a form of alienation characteristic of the masses. Under the exasperated or disdainful gaze of the specialists, books for the general public and works of popularisation sprout up, the abundance of their colour illustrations echoing the generosity of their rhetoric, designed to impress all of those for whom Van Gogh is henceforth "the man with the severed ear", the elevation of the hero is explicitly imputed to the exemplary character of his life, which cannot be disassociated from his work.

To be truly "touching" in the strong sense of the word, the martyr must be close to the common folk. That is a fundamental principle of the cult of martyrdom (or the dereliction of the accursed artist) may even be less the cause than the expression of a greatness that needs no specific action to bring it into being. Such is the case of the man whose sacrifice of his own life to a higher truth has separated him from the community, and who is thus great by virtue of his sacrifice before being great by virtue of his positive actions. Contrary to the miracle-working saint, works (in the sense of charitable works as well as created works) are merely a secondary dimension in the sacrificial saint. They only testify to his excellence. Being precedes action in him. Martyrdom is mere testimony, in the proper sense of the word. Thus, in the personalising version of the celebration of Van Gogh, the brilliance of his work ranks second behind his excellence as a person, which is essentially built upon the negative virtues of abnegation and self-sacrifice. As a person, he is both familiar, for he is a man like any other and exceptional, for he has stood out from the crowd. The saint is the man who sacrifices himself. Celebrating him requires drawing attention to him as a man, and as one who has been sacrificed.

By contrast, the "operationalistic" celebration tends to highlight the literally extraordinary character of the objectified manifestations of his greatness (heroic acts or brilliant works handed down to posterity). This is what specialists engage in when, leaving aside biographical accidents and the person's moral qualities, they seek to bring out the sublime nature of an action, the specificity of a work of art, the singularity of a process. In the ancient world, heroes were celebrated thus. The approach of English historian Roger Fry is a good example of this principle of celebrating an artist's work rather than the man himself. During the 1930s, he was one of the first to oppose the "myth" of van Gogh that was being created. Nowadays the most modern exegesis denounce the "myth of the accursed artist" inasmuch as it conceals the oeuvre behind the man. They take care to celebrate the artist only to the extent that what is admired in him is not a person great by suffering, but the author of great works.

The work of art is regarded hermeneutically and mystically as the depository of an enigmatic meaning that the commentator must reveal, while at the same time he must renounce any ambition of mastering it verbally. From this perspective, life cannot provide access to the work's

meaning, that is, incidents of a man's life in no way explain his work. Even supposing that every biography does not become a deleterious mediation, an obstacle to the truth of art. Thus aesthetic hermeneutics contrasts with artistic hagiography (hagiography being the tool of separation here) as it does with the man. From a personalistic perspective, the man can be regarded as the proper object of celebration (it is possible that having a patron, a mecenate during Renaissance provided a platform for separation between the person and the work of art as the patron was celebrated for his patronage rather than the artist) his oeuvre merely the meditation thereof. From an operationalistic perspective, the man can appear as a bad mediation, as obstructing the path to the oeuvre.

In any event, both outlooks involve some mediation. The oeuvre mediates the man in the celebration of the saint. The man mediates the oeuvre in the celebration of the hero or the genius. What varies is the aim of celebration (depending on whether the presence of the man or the meaning of his oeuvre is at issue), and the value attributed to the mediation (depending on whether it conceals and must therefore be ignored or denounced, or whether it reveals what it mediates and must therefore be commented on or celebrated).

This chain of thought reminded me of the phenomenon that is Banksy¹⁰⁰. I started wondering what Banksy's "gift" may be. His anonymity maybe. Just like Picasso, he is an entertainer. The anonymity is enticing. He is teasing us and creating a mystery for an audience to solve.

5.2 Who Is To Blame?

"Artistic skill has nothing to do with technical proficiency, mimetic exactitude, or so-called good drawing. For every great artist, there is a different definition of skill. Take drawing classes, if you wish; learn to draw "like the masters." You still have to do it in an original way. Pollock could not draw realistically, but he made flicking paint at a canvas from above, for a time, the most prized skill in the artworld. You can do the same — your skill will be whatever it is you're doing differently." — Jerry Saltz in *How To Be An Artist*

Let's say that an artist is doing something truly unique and working tirelessly day in and day out and yet his or her practice is struggling. We have all seen it happen again and again and some of us have lived it more than once. So, who is to blame when an artist does not 'succeed' in the conventional sense of the word?

Well, as the 19th century English scholar and poet G.A. Simcox famously stated: it is "their (the artists) own fault"¹⁰¹:

In the beginning of *Some Causes Of Artistic Failure*, Simcox writes:

"It is a commonplace that there are many artists with a really genuine talent who have not done what was expected of them, and now are never likely to do it; and of course much the pleasantest explanation of this is, that it is their own fault: that if they worked harder, or if they had not isolated themselves, or at any rate if they had done or left undone something that was in their own power, they would have been famous and successful, or at any rate have come to the perfection of themselves (1873:168)."

¹⁰⁰ Banksy is a pseudonymous England-based street artist, political activist and film director whose real name and identity remain unconfirmed and the subject of speculation. Source: Holzwarth, Hans Werner, ed. 100 contemporary artists. Vol. 1. Taschen, 2009.

¹⁰¹ Simcox, G. A. 'some Causes Of Artistic Failure.' *The Portfolio: an artistic periodical* 4 (1873): 168-171.

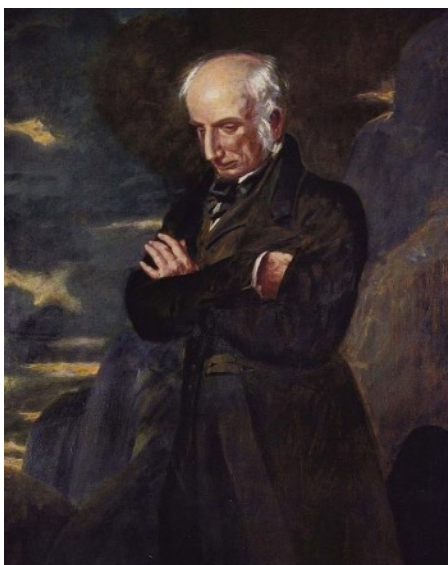
According to my research and the interviews I have conducted so far, “doing what is expected” seems to still be a requirement in the artworld, one “small” difference being that with globalisation, migration and socio-economic change in the contemporary artworld, expectations have become frustratingly blurry. Also, success has become notoriously difficult to define. I am sorry to say, dear G.A. Simcox, “being conscious of my vocation” and “doing my best” is not nearly enough.

“And as mortals are never faultless, there is little risk in the assertion that an artist, who from his first becoming conscious of his vocation should sedulously and unintermittently do his best, might really ensure this result (1873:168).”

G.A. Simcox continues: “such an assertion might be plausibly supported by the example of Wordsworth, whose gift was not one to attract the public at once”. He adds: “... [his gift] did not manifest itself with any very peculiar splendour or charm at first; but he himself believed in it, and lived for it, and so became a classic by force of industry and earnestness...”. In addition to believing and living for one’s vocation Wordsworth had, according to the author “a kind of high reasonableness which was quite compatible with an entire absence of common sense, i.e. the capacity for being sensible with the sense of all his neighbours”. Singing his praises, Simcox admits that “Wordsworth was less popular not only than Scott—who, in addition to industry equal to Wordsworth’s own, had a sense of what would take, and was not too proud to cultivate it—but than Byron, who cannot be said to have understood his talent, who affected to undervalue it, and did nothing to improve it except exercise it (1873:168).” There Simcox adds the dimension of having “a sense of what would take” meaning one has to shed a layer of pride and keep improving oneself. Although not explicitly written, it is clearly implied by the author that improving oneself in this context means not rising above one’s peers (or “neighbours”).

The example here is interesting given what we now know and remember about Wordsworth, Scott and Byron. In perspective, the tables have clearly turned.

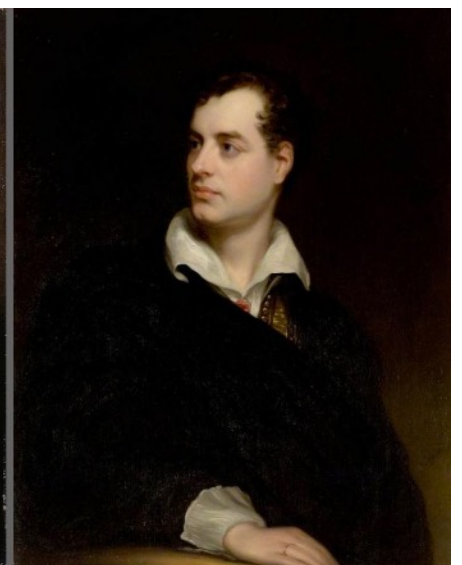
William Wordsworth¹⁰² is fairly well known in the British scholar community and amongst poetry lovers familiar with the romantic movement, but Wordsworth is rarely mentioned outside those



William Wordsworth (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850)
Source: Wikimedia Commons



Sir Walter Scott (1771 - 1832)
Source: Wikimedia Commons



The Lord Byron (1788 – 1824)
Source: Wikimedia Commons

circles. Byron, on the other hand, is a globally celebrated poetic genius whose works are recited and discussed in every school and university on earth. In Simcox’s example above, Byron’s failure

¹⁰² Gill, Stephen. *William Wordsworth: a life*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

to “understand his talent” is supposed to have affected his legacy greatly. Well, that did not happen now did it?

So, how does one “secure” one’s success according to Simcox?

“In general, though it may be true that perfect diligence will command success where there is real power to begin with, it is not true that success is attained in the ratio either of the original power or of the diligence, or of the two taken together. It is important to remember this and make allowance for it; because, when an effect is due to several causes, some of which only are removable, it will be easier to get the removable removed if those which are irremovable have been honestly recognised. In fact, if some artists, in order to make the best of their gift, have to work harder and more anxiously than others, it can hardly be superfluous to ascertain the causes by which they are handicapped in the race for success (1873:168).”

Unpicking the statement above, I find a clear red thread in the words: *power*, *diligence*, *anxiously*, and *race*. The “original power”, Simcox mentions, can be understood as the combination of talent recognising their vocation and the support they get from powerful people. Diligence is, of course, part of that education. Anxiously (as in “some artists in order to make the best of their gift, have to work harder and more anxiously than others”) points to an underlying idea of never resting, always keeping an eye on the proverbial ball, always entertaining one’s audience while always bowing to them, because... it is a race — a competition that never ends. The artist can never rest.

These causes are “partly internal and partly external”, Simcox explains. “For instance, if they ask why Haydon failed where West succeeded, the cause was mainly internal. Haydon did not understand how to make faulty organisation second his intentions”. What Simcox is saying here is that Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846) - a notable British artist, did not admit his faults publicly and bow to the judgement of his peers (he was not willing to give away “the gift” in exchange for a chance at greatness).

I find Simcox’s *Some Causes Of Artistic Failure* fascinating, not only because it gives us a rare opportunity to tap into the nineteenth century understanding of what an artist is and does, but also because when Simcox discusses artistic failure (it is in the title and I am sure he meant it that way) and what may cause artists to fail, he talks about personal failures in general and failure to adapt in particular. None of this is about failing in art itself, as in making mistakes in one’s artwork, redoing, rewriting, learning from mistakes while practicing, using the wrong color combinations or phrases, not having an unique point of view, and ultimately, failing at conveying one’s truth.

But maybe it is not just about the judgement of others, maybe there is something inherently wrong with the way we perceive our own rights to succeed and fail.

In my attempt to unravel the mechanisms behind the exclusion of artistic failure from our understanding of the role art and artists play in contemporary culture, I decided to go to the source.

In 2020, I asked the artist and art blogger Paul Kneen to help me carry out a survey among members of his community of artists¹⁰³. We asked a number of questions related to the concepts of artistic failure and success. These are some of the common answers (as in shared by a majority of participants) we received:

"Failure is an integral part of Success as that is how we make progress" (NS, PK)

¹⁰³ Detailed transcript available on demand

"But that is not how we are judged. People signal our worthiness by buying what we make (arts vs. crafts)" (NS, PK, DZ, DF, MF, MW)

"It is all about the process. We feel excitement, it is fun and even therapy, we are either able or unable to express our ideas. If you can express your ideas through art then that is a success in itself (DZ, PK, LH, JM, GM, KW)

"Art as technology of the self (striving to enhance oneself, be better, developing a "thicker skin", being understood, successfully conveying something)" (DZ, LH, JM, DF, GM, BF, DM, KB, GR)

"Negotiating free will". You get to have more free will (more opportunities and choices) if you are successful (LH, PK, DF)

"Art is about taking responsibility" (SS)

In summary, the idea of the artworld as an artificial construct which does not make any sense on an individual level, is wide-spread. "The artworld is ignorant", as many of the participants stated. Failure and success are internalised as a result. It is in the hands of each one of us. Thus the artist and the so-called "artworld" are separated, the relationship is random or blurry at best, and most of the time, there is no connection at all.

It is our common belief that value in the artworld is established through monetary means or traded off in exchange for acknowledgement.

Art is also treated as technology of the self, a form of therapy rather than a livelihood. It is fascinating to me how often artists fall into a pitfall created by the creative industry's addiction to exploitation - the "I am not making any money from this but it is good for me" trap. To me this is a form of stagnation.

Another thread that frequently came up in our survey was the idea that success is associated with free will, as in the choice one makes to constantly negotiate terms to one's advantage.

Whenever they interviewed artists referred to failing, it was all about one of two things (or in worst case scenario, both): 1: circumstances beyond their control getting in the way or 2: experiencing the harsh reality of their own limitations.

Throughout the survey, only one artist expressed (vaguely) a desire to expand the role of art beyond the goal of individual success. This artist was the only person who mentioned "a bigger picture" and artistic failure in the context of "a bigger purpose" than making a comfortable living doing art.

These interviews only confirmed what I have suspected all along, that Simcox's idea that failure is "the artist's own fault" is so deeply rooted that very few artists manage to escape it. In retrospect, resisting this idea is probably my main motivator in writing this thesis.

Chapter 6: The Genius Problem

6.1 The Man - The Myth

“At Goldsmiths, I realised you don’t need to be original. I remember thinking: ‘Steal everything.’ It’s all been done.” — *Damien Hirst In Conversation With Tim Marlow*

Throughout my life it has been apparent to me that there is a disconnect between the concept of the working artist and the concept of the recognised genius. It almost seems like a dichotomy to me and everyone else I have interviewed during the course of this project.

I have already touched upon this mythicisation of the artist in previous chapters - mythicisation that is only reserved for the selected few we label "geniuses".

The notion of the manufactured genius is often perceived as cynical. There is also a common belief that geniuses are somehow born and not manufactured. But my experience as an artist living and working in the centre of the artworld and much of my research has informed me of the contrary.

Pablo Picasso is a great example of a recognised genius whose legacy is saturated with myths. I am constantly reminded of a quote mentioned by both Berger and Cohen (see 4.4 Picasso’s Failure), namely something Picasso said in 1923: "In my opinion to search means nothing in painting. To find is the thing." I find Picasso’s reasoning exceptionally clever. What a marvelous way to eliminate artistic failure from the conversation altogether! Searching implies failure and practice to overcome failure. By eliminating the search, Picasso succeeds in elevating himself to some kind of divine being with an innate knowledge, someone who “just knows” - a god. The same type of reasoning is used as a brain-washing technique in politics and religious cults. People displaying anti-scientific attitudes have often claimed that they do not need to educate themselves because their knowledge comes from God himself.

Maybe one the biggest myths surrounding his name is the myth of his overnight success. His overnight success never happened and contrary to popular belief, Picasso did not orchestrate his success single-handedly.

When, at the age of nineteen, the young Pablo Picasso emigrated to Paris, he could barely speak a word of French. His finances were in shambles and he lived in a small studio with other penniless artists.¹⁰⁴

Shortly after Picasso settled in Paris, his close friend, Carlos Casagemas, committed suicide. Traumatized by this tragedy, the young artist returned to Barcelona where his father, Don José Blasco was so appalled by the somber works Picasso was creating that he reprimanded him for his failure stating that he had no chance of making a living as a painter. Discouraged, Pablo decided to give Paris another go after more than a year of more or less proving his father right.

In 1904, the wealthy American heiress Gertrude Stein became familiar with Picasso’s work. She bought a series of his paintings and commissioned him to paint her portrait. A year later Picasso had become a Stein family favourite and Gertrude Stein started exhibiting his paintings in her infamous Paris home salon at 27 rue de Fleurus¹⁰⁵. Not long after, Picasso created his breakthrough painting, *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.)* (see figure below) which launched the cubism

¹⁰⁴ O'Brian, Patrick. *Picasso: A biography*. WW Norton & Company, 1994.

¹⁰⁵ Blair, Sara. "Home Truths: Gertrude Stein, 27 Rue de Fleurus, and the Place of the Avant-Garde." *American Literary History* 12.3 (2000): 417-437.



Stein sitting in front of paintings at 27 rue de Fleurus, including Picasso's painting of her. Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

art movement and shaped modern art in more than one way.

The more cynical of critics may say that it was Gertrude Stein who “made” Picasso and the more forgiving may say that it was Picasso’s doing for taking an opportunity and making the best of it. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. Yes, Gertrude Stein was responsible for much of Picasso’s fame at the time, but nothing would have become of it without Pablo’s talent and ambition. As it often happens, circumstances and personal growth go hand in hand to push things forward. This said, the most interesting chapters are written in the aftermath. How come the wheels of the artworld continue to turn in one’s favour even when one has ceased to progress?

This is where it gets interesting because no wheels will turn if there is no machinery attached to them.

When it comes to self-mythicisation, no one is a better example than the

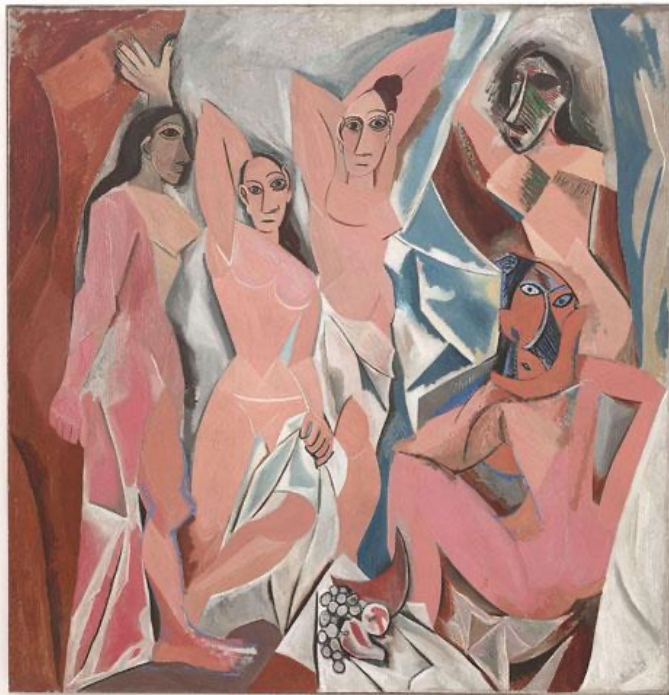
infamous graffiti art phenomenon *Banksy* whose entire identity is about surrounding oneself in a shroud of mystery. Although *Banksy* has traveled extensively across the globe to create site-specific pieces, is exhibited in major museums, and has had his work auctioned at notable auction houses such as *Sotheby's* in London, his identity remains a mystery. *Banksy's* anonymity is not only a way to wrap oneself in mystery but also a kind of insurance against punishment and failure. Well, personal failure mostly, anonymity does not seem to make one bulletproof when it comes to artistic failure.

As *Elisabeth Westendorf* points out in *Banksy as Trickster: The Rhetoric of Street Art, Public Identity, and Celebrity Brands*¹⁰⁶, spontaneously staging his artistic speech acts in the public realm through the anonymous art form of street art “allows *Banksy* to disembodiment himself from his artwork while inviting any incidental audience member to seize control of the rhetorical situation”. As *Tristan Manco* points out, the criminality associated with spray-painted artwork in some ways “gives it an edge: the audience feels part of something which is both personal and subversive.”¹⁰⁷ It is an expression of difference and defiance that inspires readers to personally relieve the tension between art and social process (2010:16).

The idea that there is a genius-making machine of a sort embedded in the centre of the art industry is rarely discussed in art critical writings. Infamous critics, such as *Jerry Saltz* and the late

¹⁰⁶ Westendorf, Elizabeth J. *Banksy as Trickster: The Rhetoric of Street Art, Public Identity, and Celebrity Brands*. Diss. Ohio University, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ Chung, Sheng Kuan. "An art of resistance from the street to the classroom." *Art Education* 62.4 (2009): 25-32.



Les Femmes d'Alger by Picasso (1907)
Image Source: Wikipedia

Brian Sewell, have been criticised by the media, scholars and colleagues alike for exposing these mechanisms. Brian Sewell was described as “Britain's most controversial art critic” for many decades and Jerry Saltz has never ceased to enrage the artworld.

Jerry Saltz’s take on Banksy’s New York 2013 residency is breathtakingly bold and an unmistakably clear poke at the artworld’s obsession with the phenomenon Banksy: “Our monthlong snorefest is over. British self-promo man and Batman-graffiti-artist Banksy has concluded his one-work-a-day “New York Residency.”

He calls Banksy “banal” and his works “artworld fodder for tabloids”. 'say goodbye to flash mobs of tourists running from painting to painting taking selfies; to easy

“artworld” fodder for tabloids and local TV crews; to sledgehammer-obvious cheekiness, drop-dead pictorial banality, and glib political commentaries painted on New York City walls”, Saltz writes. “Never mind the fact that Banksy fanboys and fangirls passed at least a dozen better pieces of street art every time they rushed to see one of his paintings — no other graffiti artist has a PR machine remotely like Banksy’s. You can almost hear him laughing all the way to the, well, bank.”

It is clearly communicated in an article published in Vulture.com in 2013¹⁰⁸, that Saltz regards Banksy’s success as very much based on the artist’s ability to create exactly what the artworld expects of him.

“I have no problem with graffiti. And Banksy, like many British artists, is especially good at creating scenes and generating buzz. He’s just amazingly unoriginal in terms of his actual work. Still, I’m an art critic and all artists have their own curve to be graded on. Believe it or not, I actually like a few of his efforts. Which, come to think of it, isn’t so terrible for any artist — especially one as frothy and predictable as Banksy.”

Among contemporary scholars, Peter Kivy is a name often associated with research regarding the above-mentioned genius-making process, but his influential account of how composers came to be recognised as geniuses has recently come under attack¹⁰⁹. Still, to a large degree, his accounts on the discourse of the artistic genius bear relevance in the context of this chapter.

In *The Possessor and the Possessed*¹¹⁰ Kivy examines the initiation of Handel into “the pantheon of genius” as the first composer to be accorded this recognition” (2001, p.37). Handel was, according to Kivy, the first musician to be regarded as a genius by the “movers and shakers” of

¹⁰⁸ Jerry Saltz in Vulture Magazine Online 2013 (<https://www.vulture.com/2013/10/saltz-ranking-banksys-nyc-pieces.html>). Viewed on September 17th, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Young, James O. "On the Enshrinement of Musical Genius." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*(2014): 47-62.

¹¹⁰ Kivy, Peter, and K. Y. Peter. *The possessor and the possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the idea of musical genius*. Yale University Press, 2001.

the intellectual world and by philosophers in particular as the selected few with the rights to subjectivity (see chapter 3).

“Those who are so recognized may be called great geniuses, to distinguish them from geniuses who have not been recognized as such by the culture to which they belong. Kivy grants that many composers were held in high esteem by other musicians, but were not the sort of cultural icon that Michelangelo was (or Handel became).”(2014:49)

The role of philosophers in the recognition of genius is the second crucial aspect of Kivy's position. He believes that, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, philosophers developed, or in many cases, redeveloped two distinct conceptions of genius. The first concept he describes is a Longinian conception of genius which is based on the ancient treatise, *On the Sublime*, published in a new English translation in 1739 (2014:50). Longinian genius can be seen as a gift of nature or “a propensity for breaking established rules”, and also “the ability to produce sublime work”. According to Peter Kivy, thinkers such as Edward Young adopted this Longinian conception of genius. The Longinian conception was also applied to Handel, making possible his recognition as a great genius.

Subsequently, Kivy believes, Schopenhauer developed “a Platonic conception of genius”. The Platonic genius is one who is divinely inspired, who is “possessed, perhaps even mad” and even “childlike”. Thanks to Schopenhauer, Mozart was recognized as a great genius in the Platonic sense of the term. The concept of genius was after that developed by Kant into a neo-Longinian conception which in turn allowed Beethoven to be recognized as a great genius.

Regardless of how we understand these geniuses, it's important to establish what makes them different from “normal” people.

It's not the first time history has engaged in the creation of myths and art history is not an exception. In *The Purpose of Art*¹¹¹ George Watts writes: “Art and poetry have their good mission, and great art, like great poetry, must necessarily have that in it which you do not have in everyday life.” Then he continues, “No man is purer than Tennyson, and no one, I presume, would think to accuse him of obscenity...”. In discussing Tennyson, Watts uses the word “pure”, and not only that but he claims that there is no man “purer” than the poet Tennyson.

“... and yet he has written things in his finest poetry that you would not speak about in a drawing-room. And so might there be things that you would not call attention to in a picture, while all the time it is recognised as absolutely right that they should be there. The greatest art is that which deals with types and which appeals to the imagination and not merely to the eye.”

There are similarities between what Watts is describing here and what I call “the exchange” in chapters 4 and 5, mainly the notion of purity attached to a person who has paid his or her dues, either by recognising rules and hierarchy (doing what is necessary to succeed in their modern times) or by surrendering their identity to their audience (entertaining the public through personal failure and redemption).

This view of the artist as a passive receiver, or as someone who is in the center of the mythicisation process but not actively participating, is quite common. But we must not forget that most histories featuring geniuses in the making contain an element of self-mythicisation.

¹¹¹ Watts, George Frederick. “THE AIMS OF ART.” *The Magazine of art* (1888): 253-254.

In his essay *The Artist And The Self*¹¹² Paul Bruno explores that point where the artist and the self forge an identity, or “how is it that modern depictions of the self rely so much on an aesthetic sensibility? (2000:1)”. In order to do that, Bruno creates a historical framework based on the work of Immanuel Kant.

“Pippin goes on to say that there is a noticeable way that the spirit of self-determination and autonomy is interpreted after Kant. That is, the artistic or aesthetic life became the dominant mode for determining one’s self, the paradigmatic manner of accepting Kant’s dare to think for oneself (2000:2).”

Bruno explains further that “not only does Kant leave provocative suggestions regarding the role of art, but he also is a leading figure in transforming the way in which imagination was conceived.” In many ways, René Descartes continued in Kant’s footsteps by setting up a problem for western philosophy “that challenged philosophers for many years”. This “problem” was the introduction of imagination as a way of overcoming the subject/object split. Here Bruno quotes Warnock who states “We may fairly claim, then, that imagination can dissolve what had seemed to Descartes and his successors the insoluble problem of the relations between the inner and the outer, the mental and the corporeal (2000:4).” As Warnock explains in *Imagination*:

“From Kant’s time on, imagination was increasingly recognized to be an essential part of making sense of the world, even for those without the elevated powers of genius.”¹¹³

Or as Pippin writes: “Artists, poets, novelists and philosophers...do not just begin experimental, ironic attempts at radical ‘redescription’; they do so in response to a common view of their historical inheritance and with a clear view of what has ‘now’ come to be understood about that legacy and, presumably, its pretensions (2000:8).”

Further, Bruno discusses a point of view expressed by Nietzsche in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. In that essay Nietzsche says that artists and their position in the world, but also against the world, is “far from sufficiently independent” because of “their changing valuations to merit our attention”. “Down the ages”, Nietzsche continues, “they have been the valets of a morality or philosophy or religion: quite apart from the fact that they were, unfortunately, often the all-too-glib courtiers of their hangers-on and patrons and sycophants with a nose for old or indeed up-and-coming forces.”

According to Bruno, this particular comment “does not militate against the many positive things that Nietzsche attributes to the artist, but it does suggest that Nietzsche was also suspicious of the artist and the likelihood of their becoming “valets” of a particular worldview (2000:9).” Here Bruno clarifies his viewpoint in regard to commercial, cliché driven acts of difference, stating that Nietzsche’s comment may “point to the necessity for some kind of signpost”. This danger of becoming a valet of morality or philosophy or religion is by no means small but a risk worth taking in the name of individuality and autonomy, as Bruno puts it. “What must be remembered”, he continues, “is that [...] what founds a work of art is neither simply the artist’s faith in themselves, nor the wholly arbitrary assumption of total responsibility (2000:9).”

“It is not uncommon, in our time, to see an artist valorized to such a degree that his works of art become secondary. As he points out, the “fully fledged mythicization of the figure of the artist can only be understood in the framework of a culture in which religion is substituted for art...” (Vattimo 1997, 71). The consequences of the mythicization of the artistic figure show themselves in the “increasingly remoteness of a lot of art to the masses; the masses, in turn, remain prisoners of kitsch” (Vattimo 1997, 71).”

¹¹² Bruno, Paul. "The Artist and the Self." (2000).

¹¹³ Warnock, Mary. *Imagination*. University of California Press, 1976.

(This genius versus “prisoners of kitsch” dichotomy is something I happened to be very familiar with. I grew up in Eastern Europe during the last decade of communism and the separation Vattimo talks about was overwhelmingly obvious during my childhood and early adolescence. Attending one of the few art schools in the country meant I had to travel from the kitsch world to the genius island and back every day of the five years I spent there. Self-mythicisation was a key component of how the communist regime created its ideological apparatus and the so-called artworld present at that time was the breeding ground for everyone with ambition to become one of the few with rights to subjectivity.)

Now back to Bruno...

“The aesthetic self, the self that can say, “Thus, I willed it,” finds himself in one of two positions: First, he must posit his elite status. The model for this self is the outcast, eccentric, unreachable artist/self. Second, he is awash in pop culture, a “prisoner of kitch.” Such an artist/self enacts difference in ways that are flush with consumerist, cliched labels of difference. One only has to take a brief look at MTV or on the streets of any city for examples of this.”

Although somewhat simplified, this description of how self-mythicisation may take a person from a position of being part of “the masses” to a celebrated artist, is rather accurate. The self enactment of difference “in ways that are flush with consumerist, cliched labels of difference” is a method so used and misused by artists worldwide that it does not work any longer. When something becomes the conventional way of doing things, people run out of controversial ideas.

In *How Is Damien Hirst A Cultural Entrepreneur?*¹¹⁴ Marisa Enhuber writes: “Hirst’s approach to contemporary conceptual art and his factory-like art production are both controversial and successful as defined by the author (2014:3).” This description sums him up in one sentence while strongly emphasising the self-mythicisation component of his story.

In an article published in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* in 2015¹¹⁵, the infamous artist and trouble-maker Damien Hirst is quoted expressing regret for the loss of his ability to shock. The article tells a poignant story full of examples of how the genius-making and self-mythicisation processes work together to put an artist in a position of power.

“During the period he refers to as his “glory years”, Damien Hirst had a favourite gag. He would pull his foreskin through a hole in his pocket, then exclaim in mock alarm: “What’s that?”, people would go, “You’ve got some chewing gum on your trousers.” They would touch it and go, “What the fuck?” he said, smirking. He played this trick on drinking buddies and he played it on complete strangers. He particularly enjoyed targeting self-important artworld types. Hirst recently turned 50, and these days he appears to be almost fully house-trained. He still has the swagger, leather jacket and T-shirt wardrobe of a rock star, and his mobile phone is loaded with eye-poppingly deviant film clips that he collects for his amusement and often shares; but he also now does yoga three times a week, and stopped flashing when he gave up drink and drugs almost nine years ago.”

“Furthermore”, Hirst continues, “I think that there is a real question about the activity of artistic creation.” According to him, “...we have been wedded to the idea of creativity and production rather than the idea that has more weight when thought strictly in terms of historical time, that is, mimesis and reproduction” ever since the Romantics. Then he quotes Aby Warburg and the idea that artists are generally involved in situations of “choice and conflict in their work”. Warburg

¹¹⁴ Enhuber, Marisa. "How is Damien Hirst a cultural entrepreneur?." *Artivate* 3.2 (2014): 3-20.

¹¹⁵ Mayer, Catherine, *The Guardian*, June 30th, 2015. Accessed in September 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jun/30/damien-hirst-what-have-i-done-ive-created-a-monster>

“preferred to think of artists as in positions of resistance to the spirit of the age”, he explains. This notion of resistance is consistent with the aforementioned comment of Pippin that “artists, poets, novelists and philosophers... do not just begin experimental, ironic attempts at radical redescription; they do so in response to a common view of their historical inheritance and with a clear view of what has now come to be understood about that legacy and, presumably, its pretensions”.

“Such acts of resistance suggest a creativity that recognizes that artists and selves always already live in a world that is constitutive of their individuality. This is a creativity that cannot take refuge in the often shallow stances of “difference,” but rather recognizes that difference is negotiated in a common sense, to use Kant’s term, or a common view, to use Pippin’s. This creativity recognizes that so many attempts at “difference” are thoroughly grounded in a consumerist and media driven culture—the very thing that needs to be resisted. Such a creativity recognizes that the creative acts coming from productive imagination are always commingled with elements of imitation.” (2000:10)

The idea of creativity which “recognizes that the creative acts coming from productive imagination are always commingled with elements of imitation” may ring true to some but it sounds highly self-serving to me, especially in this context. I am immediately reminded of the Oscar Wilde quote: “Art only begins where imitation ends.”¹¹⁶

There has been a lot of controversy around Hirst lately. He was not only openly criticized for imitating other people’s work but was also accused of the worst possible kind of appropriation.

In 2017, just ahead of the 57th Venice Biennial, Hirst was made to answer for allegedly appropriating historically significant works.

“The piece, *Golden Heads (Female)*, appropriates a Yoruba sculpture taken from Nigeria during British colonial rule. One of the work’s first vocal critics, Nigerian artist Victor Ehikhamenor posted a photo of Hirst’s piece on his Instagram and commented “the British are back for more,” continuing “for the thousands of viewers seeing this for the first time, they won’t think Ife, they won’t think Nigeria. Their young ones will grow up to know this work as Damien Hirst’s.”¹¹⁷

The *Golden Heads* sculpture was one of dozens of artworks by Hirst spread across the *Palazzo Grassi* and the *Punta della Dogana* museums in Venice as part of an exhibition initially conceived as a “fairy-tale” where Hirst “stumbles upon a fictional freed Turkish slave’s treasures in an aged shipwreck in the sea”.

By appropriating and reimagining the head, Senbanjo argues, Hirst “tells a fictional story that obscures Britain’s colonial legacy and the true heritage of the sculpture”. But this was not the only appropriation in his show. There is also a Medusa head and a Sphinx. “But unlike the Ife head, these icons are more recognizable to the general public and less susceptible to having their own history erased”, Senbanjo argues.

According to *Artsy*, Senbanjo took particular issue with Hirst’s likely profit from the work (everything on view as part of the exhibition is also on sale), saying it “reminded him of the Western world’s complicity in the slave trade and colonization.” He confessed: “This is still a wound”.

¹¹⁶ Quigley, Austine. "Realism and symbolism in Oscar Wilde's Salome." *Modern Drama* 37.1 (1994): 104-119.

¹¹⁷ Meiselman, Jessica, "Damien Hirst Show Sparks Accusations of Cultural Appropriation" published by *Artsy* in Maj 2017, accessed in Jan 2022. Internet Source. (url: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-damien-hirst-sparks-accusations-cultural-appropriation>)

Hirst is only one of several famed artists currently under fire because of artistic failure. Maybe, just maybe, the time has come to question the myths perpetuated by the artworld. This conflict between man and myth is obvious in the case of Hirst. Maybe, just maybe, our eyes are starting to open.

6.2 Open To Exploitation

While researching this paper, I stumbled upon Krystyna Warchol's PhD dissertation exploring the cultural and economic value of new artwork in central (New York) and regional (Philadelphia) artworlds.¹¹⁸ Her study offered a nuanced in-depth analysis of the roles that dealers, critics, collectors and museums play in the assignment of value to new art and in the building of artists' careers. The paper provided some valuable insight into the inner workings of the artworld and aided me in my research a great deal.

Warchol explores the interactions that exist between and among these players, but also shows how they are interdependent. The production of value in the artworld has always been a murky field to explore as the questions are many and the answers few and highly localised. But by selecting the territory of New York - a place recognised for its experimentation and pioneering practices - for her study, she is able to explore the nature of the evaluative functions performed by artworld actors in a unique way thus answering some universal questions.

Her study shows that "dealers, critics, collectors and museums all play separate and crucial roles in the collective construction of value for new art". But "all the actors are mutually interdependent on each other and could not perform their evaluative functions outside of the dense network of cooperation that exists between them", she adds. Due to the interactive nature of the contemporary artworld, "no member (or group of members) can single handedly create an artistic reputation, no matter what cultural authority they possess", Warchol states. It is clear to her that "the power to confer reputation occurs in many channels, through which consensus is built collectively about the value of an artist and his or her work" (1992:vii-viii).

Warchol's study shows that among the artworld's players, the ones that emerged as "especially powerful in assigning value to art", were leading private collectors. It is why the nature and significance of collecting practices along with their sociological determinants became central to her research, Warchol explains. Her study also shows that the influence of critics and museums seems to be on the decline, but also that artists emerge as "the most significant and uncredited discoverers of new art and artists".

She quotes Arnold Hauser who said that upon release of an artist's work, the work "is by no means sociologically complete", but "only complete by its reception". "As the instrument of social practice which is beyond form, however, art realizes its true intention only when it participates in the concrete receptive act" (1992:2).

It is important to understand that a fundamental fact about works of art is that their value "is derived from social worlds", the author explains. She quotes Danto who wrote: "to see something as art requires something the eye can't decay — an atmosphere of arts theory, a knowledge of the history of art, and an artworld" (1964:580 in 1992:2)

Using another quote, Warchol clarifies:

¹¹⁸ Warchol, Krystyna Barbara, "The market system of the artworld and new art: Prices, roles and careers in the 1980s" (1992).

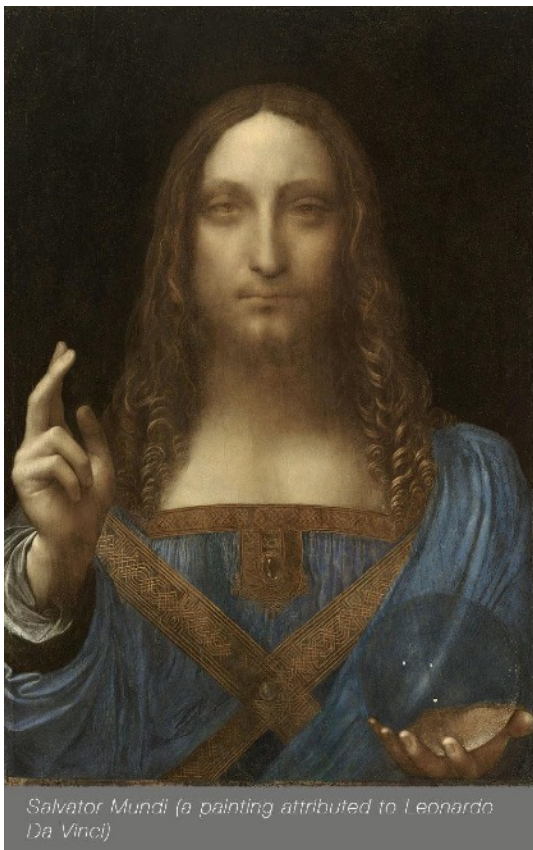
“Richard Christopherson elaborated on this further: The physical object itself, the piece of art, is completely dependent on what is said about where it is housed, the name of the person who created it, and so forth. The meaning of the "object" or its very existence as "art" is external to the object itself, and is greatly the construction of the general culture and of a social situation we call the artworld (1974:8 in 1992:3)

Christopherson’s perspective “sees value not as intrinsic, but rather as socially constructed”, Warchol explains. “The value of work is created — and then reproduced and transmitted — through various forms of evaluation”. These various forms of evaluation can be private and public, implicit and explicit, “as well as through the whole range of activities such as the awarding of prizes to artists, the commissioning of works, etc” (1992:3).

Olav Velthuis, a professor at the University of Amsterdam who studies sociology in the arts was quoted in an article saying:

"The art market functions as a big consensus marketing machine," Velthuis continued. "So what people do is look at quality signals. Those signals can be for instance what an important curator is saying about an artist; if [the artist] has exhibitions in museums; if influential collectors are buying his work. Because everybody is, to some extent at the least, looking at the same signals, at one point they start agreeing [on] who are the most desirable artists."¹¹⁹

The reason some artwork sells for millions of dollars, Olav Velthuis explains further in Lee's article, is "because there's a consensus in the artworld that those works should sell for millions of dollars". And, since art is a market for unique objects, Velthuis continues, "there’s also a sense of scarcity" even in regards to artists such as Jeff Koons and Demian Hirst who, as Velthuis puts it, “pump out works at industrial scale”. "It definitely is a good example of a winner-take-all market, where revenues and profits are distributed in a highly unequal way", he concludes.



According to the UBS and Art Basel reports, just 0.2% of artists have work that sells for more than \$10 million, but 32% of the \$63-plus billion in art sales in 2017 “came from works that sold for more than \$10 million”. An analysis conducted by Artnet that year found that only 25% of artists accounted for nearly half of all contemporary auction sales in the first six months of 2017. It is important to note that only three of those artists were women.

“Who buys art?”, Velthuis asks. The answer comes easy to him: “The super rich”.

The author uses the 2017 sale of *Salvator Mundi* (a painting attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci) as an extreme example of how monetary value is assigned “willy-nilly”. The sale “reignited discussions about the role of money in the artworld — and even spawned a #Resistance-y conspiracy theory about dark money and the 2016 presidential election”.

The controversy surrounding *Salvator Mundi* is far from

¹¹⁹ Del Valle, Gaby “Why Is Art So Expensive” published by Vox in May 2019, accessed Jan 2022. Internet Source; (url: <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/10/31/18048340/art-market-expensive-ai-painting>)

over. Jerry Saltz, one of the most determined critics of this “deal”, posted recently on Twitter:

“Remember the fishy Leonardo Da Vinci painting that @ChristiesInc sold & I was the only “idiot” who said it was fake? Turns out I was right. It was an oil deal: “MBS laid down clear conditions: show Salvator Mundi beside Mona Lisa with no explanation, present it as 100% Leonardo.”¹²⁰

The case of the “questionable” Leonardo painting may be extreme, but this type of trading is not unusual in the artworld.

“In a 2017 interview with the Financial Times, Georgina Adam, an art market expert and author of *Dark Side of the Boom: The Excesses of the Art Market in the 21st Century*, explained how it's possible that a single painting could cost more money than most people see in their lifetimes. “Very rich people, these days, have an astonishing amount of money,” Adam said. A gallerist interviewed in her book explained it this way: if a couple has a net worth of \$10 billion and decides to invest 10 percent of that in art, that gives them \$1 billion with which to buy all the paintings and sculptures their heart desires.” (2019)

As Georgina Adam explains, the number of collectors has never been bigger. Those collectors are also “wealthier than they have ever been”. According to Adam's book, the liberalization of certain economies, including China's, India's, and those of several countries in Eastern Europe, “led to an art collection boom outside the US and Western Europe”. She adds Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (also known as the Gulf states) as hotspots for collectors. “As a result”, she states, “the market has exploded into what writer Rachel Wetzler described as “a global industry bound up with luxury, fashion, and celebrity, attracting an expanded range of ultra-wealthy buyers who aggressively compete for works by brand-name artists.”

But art is not “a luxury good”. Art is “an investment” according to Adam.

“If investors invest wisely, the works they buy can be worth much more later on. The most famous example of an art collector/investor is Robert Scull, a New York City taxi tycoon who auctioned off pieces from his extensive collection in 1973, most of which sold for many times what Scull had purchased them for. One painting, by Robert Rauschenberg, had originally cost Scull \$900 in 1958. It sold for \$85,000.”

I do wonder, with art's fate at stake and the concept of artistic failure removed, who cares about a person's artistic struggles? It seems to me that the wheels of the artworld will turn as usual as long as one's personal failures do not in any way disrupt the mutual agreement that one's art has value.

This begs the question: If everyone is “keeping an eye out for quality” then how come nobody seems to recognise that reaching a certain level of artistic quality implies some failure along the way. The fact that only 0,2% of artists have work that sells for more than USD 10 million says a lot about the innate simplicity of how the artworld works. It seems obvious to me that keeping the art market addicted to artists not getting paid creates opportunities for exploitation and that exploitation works backwards once an artist crosses the threshold of fame. It is only the artist that fails before that line is crossed and then failure is no more.

¹²⁰ Post url: <https://twitter.com/jerrysaltz/status/1380151809415712770>

Chapter 7: Failure

Filmmaker George Lucas stated in a 2013 interview that “a person who creates, is “doing things that have a high potential for failure”, especially if those are unique things that have never been done before. “Failure is another word for experience”, he concludes.

This is something that an artist who is dedicated to their practice knows instinctively. Failing again and again is in the heart of learning through practice. Somewhere in Plovdiv, Bulgaria there is an attic or a storage room full of my own dusty horrifying failures, not because they are worth anything to anyone, but because my mother is a hoarder (although she would never admit it). These failures are things of the past and as such I would rather bathe in vinegar than have them resurface somewhere. This said, they were as necessary to my art practice as ingredients are to cooking.

7.1 Understanding Failure

In *The Art Of Failure*¹²¹—an US National Arts Council publication— a group of authors collectively admit that “...maybe—just maybe— failure isn’t such a dirty word after all”¹²². This particular issue of NEA ARTS discusses the importance of risk and experimentation in a series of interviews with artists and performers from various genres, including Toni Morrison, Geoff Nuttall, Perry Chen, Carlos Murillo, Sarah Kaufman, Gene Luen Yang and Janai Brugger.

The first interview begins with the words: “Talking to Toni Morrison about failure is a bit like talking to Einstein about stupidity: it’s incongruous, to say the least.” But for Toni Morrison, failure is just part of the process. “As a writer, a failure is just information”, she states. “It’s something that I’ve done wrong in writing, or is inaccurate or unclear. I recognize failure—which is important; some people don’t—and fix it, because it is data, it is information, knowledge of what does not work. That’s rewriting and editing.”

Toni Morrison continues:

“[My characters] have never failed me, but on a couple of occasions I have either been deeply thrown off my game, or I took the easy way out. Some of them get greedy, and they’re powerful characters. They somehow can take over the book. When I did *Song of Solomon*, there was a character in there whose name was Pilate. She was very important to the narrative, but she really threatened me in a sense. I just made her shut up, and told her this is my book, not hers.”

Toni Morrison’s words resonate with me. I too have experienced the problematic relationship one has with characters who “overwhelm”. I cannot think of any other way to describe this but as a never-ending dialog with failure. She offers more than one example of the way that dialog works. She labels these missteps “stumbles”.

“Stumbles loom rather large, the more I write. You know this is the wrong route but sometimes you choose it anyway, and then when you go over it, you just carry it out and scratch it out and do something else. But they’re very important. It’s like hitting the wrong note. You have to do something else. In a musical score, if you’re singing or you’re playing

¹²¹ Vogel, T. A. *The Art of Failure: Construction, Actualisation, Constraint*. MS thesis. 2020.

¹²² National Arts Council: *The art of failure: The importance of risk and experimentation*, 4, NEA Arts Magazine. 2014.

an instrument onstage in public, and you hit a wrong note, you can't say "Oops" and leave the stage. You have to make something out of that error, do a really powerfully creative thing. You may go down a different road. If it's public, you have to have that ability, that gift to make a mistake look creative. With writing, you can always scratch out the knowledge. You write and erase and do it over." (2020:3)

This interview offers some real insights into the way highly creative people view failure as necessary. As Morrison describes it, it is absolutely necessary to incorporate mistakes in one's process so that one learns from them.

On failures in contemporary American literature, Morrison reflects "I may be wrong about this, but it seems as though so much fiction, particularly that by younger people, is very much about themselves." She exemplifies: "Love and death and stuff, but my love, my death, my this, my that. Everybody else is a light character in that play."

This self-centricity is in itself a failure, Morrison implies. She reminisces about the time when she taught creative writing at Princeton University. Her students "had been told all of their lives to write what they knew". To break the pattern of self-centricity, she would begin her courses by saying, "Don't pay any attention to that. First, because you don't know anything and second, because I don't want to hear about your true love and your mama and your papa and your friends. Think of somebody you don't know" (2020:3).

"Even if they ended up just writing an autobiography, at least they could relate to themselves as strangers", Morrison concludes.

In another *NEA* interview, we get the opportunity to follow The St. Lawrence String Quartet while they prepare to celebrate their 25th anniversary.

On the topic of working with composers, Geoff Nuttall, first violin and co-founder of the quartet, admits:

"When you're working with composers who are alive, which is about 30 percent of what we do, your main goal is to somehow get their creative vision out to the audience. And some composers are more particular than others about how you go about doing that. Our first and most important goal is to make him happy in terms of, "That's how I wanted it to sound," or, "That's how I wanted the audience to feel at that moment." So failure, for me, is if a piece isn't well-received. If people go, "You guys did fine, but it's not a great piece" —that's our failure, not the piece's failure. (2020:5)"

Here, Geoff Nuttall talks about what it means to commit to a piece, even if it is someone else's. If you commit to a musical piece, you need to understand not only its needs but the needs of its author. This complicated relationship reminds me of the dynamic I usually experience with commissions. It can be a very difficult relationship to navigate. One has to be true to one's visual language but also incorporate certain requirements from the client. I admire Nuttall's level of commitment, but I would not always label this kind of failure as artistic failure. In many cases, it is about lack of communication rather than failing creatively.

Later in the interview, Geoff Nuttall talks about fear of failure:

"For me, playing live—nerves are always there. When they limit what you can do, it's bad. You play for 25 years in a string quartet, play 100 shows a year—but it took a couple years for me to not be non-functioning because of nerves, which is just fear of failure. It's not even something you can put your finger on. There are all these different ways to get around that, but the most obvious and simplest one to explain is you go out there and you play enough times that you start to feel comfortable in that environment. I think I'd be sort

of freaked out if I didn't get nervous. But you want to channel that energy and be just enough on the edge before you fall off to make the act of creation exciting" (2020:5).

In *Fear of failure: Friend or foe?* Martin and Marsh examine fear of failure from a need achievement perspective. After conducting research amongst high school and university students, they conclude that fear of failure "can be separated into two camps: overstriving and self-protection. Although each has yields in terms of achievement or in terms of self-protection, they render the academic process an uncertain one for students marked by anxiety, low resilience, and vulnerability to learned helplessness."¹²³ This reminds me of the situation I describe in Chapter 3 *The Rights To Subjectivity*, namely the disillusionment my students experienced because they were only judged by their successes, which is of course either a highly subjective matter (whenever taste is concerned) or it becomes a subject to quantitative measure where art students are judged by the quantity of work they produce and not the quality of the work or what they have learned.

One of the most insightful interviews in the *NEA* publication is an interview with Kickstarter co-founder Perry Chen. In regards to defining failure, he admits: "The thing that would be most worrying to me is if you saw something in your head, you had a vision for something, it was clear to you, and then when you went out and worked on it, what you produced was off somehow. Your instincts or your ability to execute are off or mis-calibrated." But this isn't the end of it, he concludes. "Even with that, you know you'll learn and you'll get better and you'll recalibrate why it is that you weren't able to execute to get there" (2020:8).

Throughout these interviews, there is a noticeable pattern: everyone of the interviewed views failure as a necessary component of the development process. In the above mentioned study conducted by Martin and Marsh, the authors conclude that both "camps" (overstriving and self-protection) have yields in terms of achievement. Whether fear of failure leads to aiming higher or protecting oneself, it can be beneficial for one's development.

This said, the artworld's disregard of artistic failure as a necessary component of art practice presents a myriad of problems. *For, what does one do with a social system that only recognises aspects of reality that serve its elite?*

7.2 Failing In Public

After reviewing hundreds of articles related to failure, I started to wonder what artistic failure looks like in the eyes of the public.

In 2013, *Hyperallergic* - an independent arts magazine - published an article in which the journalist Allison Meier lists a number of cases where celebrities "failed at art".¹²⁴ The article was a follow-up of another article by Julian Steinhauer titled: *Jay-Z Raps at Marina Abramović, or the Day Performance Art Died*.¹²⁵

¹²³ Martin, Andrew J., and Herbert W. Marsh. "Fear of failure: Friend or foe?." *Australian Psychologist* 38.1 (2003): 31-38.

¹²⁴ Meier, Allison: "Celebrities Failing In Art", Published in *Hyperallergic* in July 2013, accessed Jan 2022. Internet Source. (url: <https://hyperallergic.com/75344/celebrities-failing-at-art>)

¹²⁵ Steinhauer, Julian: "Jay-Z Raps at Marina Abramović, or the Day Performance Art Died", Published in *Hyperallergic* in 2013, accessed Jan 2022. Internet Source. (url:<https://hyperallergic.com/75293/jay-z-raps-at-marina-abramovic-or-the-day-performance-art-died>).

These articles set the proverbial ball rolling and soon other magazines, such as Vox and Vice, published their own lists of famed people's "artistic failures".

"With fame and fortune you can do just about anything, but maybe you shouldn't", Meier writes.

In the Steinhauer article, we witness an awkward performance recorded at Pace Gallery in New York. Steinhauer comments:

"Last night, rumors started circulating about Jay-Z doing some kind of Rajnar-Kjartansson-meets-Marina Abramović performance art mashup, in which he would rap his new art-inspired song "Picasso Baby" at a rotating cast of hand-picked art-world

individuals continuously for a few hours. It couldn't *really* be true, could it? And yet, it was so ridiculous, it *had* to be true. And then it turned out that DJ Spooky had tweeted about it, and so it really was true."

Hyperallergic Weekend editor Tom Micchelli's take on the performance, quoted in Steinhauer's article, was also merciless.

"Once upon a time, Performance Art was synonymous with shock

and danger. In contrast, the control, pedagogy and research embedded in those contracts and white lab coats come off as, to say the least, the tools of predictability. By creating a safe environment for a notoriously unsafe art (whose perilous reputation is due in no small part to Abramović herself), these measures seem designed to clamp down on the raging id

of Performance Art like an equally monstrous superego."

"His words seem particularly apt right now, even if he was talking about the museum to come and not about Marina-Z". "Safe environment and monstrous superegos, indeed. That's probably why most of the reactions I've seen range from unenthusiastic to apocalyptic," Steinhauer comments.

Back to Meier's article. The first "failed attempt at contemporary arts" on the list is Red Skelton. Red Skelton started his comedy career as a circus clown, Meier explains, and later "turned that early stage of his profession into some creepy clown paintings, sort of like you might find haunting the back of a Salvation Army in splintered frames".



 Anthony Hopkins
@AnthonyHopkins

GEORGE
Happy #WorldElephantDay
#AnthonyHopkinsArt #Dreamscapes #serigraph
#JeffMitchumGalleries



He was inspired by seeing “a bunch of blotches” in a painting that cost thousands of dollars “presumably some work of abstraction”, Meier suggests. After seeing the “blotches”, he got an idea, he decided to paint some clowns and sell the paintings “for thousands of dollars”. In his artist statement it states: “Clowns were Red Skelton’s favorite subject. He created many different clowns, and occasionally used other celebrities as his subjects.”

Next on Meier’s list is Sir Antony Hopkins. “Sir Antony Hopkins had his first exhibition of abstract paintings back in 2010 in London”, Meier writes.

“Although the landscapes and curious creatures, like this elephant (see Twitter post), often come off as sinister as his characters”. His statement states: “When I paint, I just paint freely without anxiety regarding outside opinions as criticisms. I do it for sheer pleasure. It’s done wonders for my subconscious – I dream now in colours.”

Don't give up the day job... Sylvester Stallone tries his hand at fine art with mixed results

By DAILY MAIL REPORTER
UPDATED: 16:08 GMT, 3 December 2009



There’s many a celebrity that will turn up to the opening of an envelope. But Rocky and Rambo star Sylvester Stallone had a very good reason for his random appearance at the Art Basel Miami Beach fair.

It was the actor’s first gallery show, and it was his colourful expressionistic paintings which were being exhibited.

But judging by the scribbled quality of the work, which includes self portraits and what looks like a line drawing of a nude woman, the 63-year-old may not want to give up his day job just yet.



© BIGPICTURESPHOTO.COM
Artist in residence: Sylvester Stallone revealed his artwork to the world at the Art Basel Miami Beach Art Fair

Meier labels Hopkins’ paintings as failed attempts at art partially because they are figurative and not abstract as the exhibit title states. This view is, of course, relevant, but it becomes clear from the statement that it is a form of therapy for Sir Antony. The real issue here is the exhibit itself. When you decide to put your therapy output on display you “release it” (a nod to Danto here). It is the act of releasing it to the public that makes it an attempt at art. And considering Sir Antony’s fame, releasing personal pieces is a risk possibly not worth taking. Why? Because, in spite of Sir Antony’s fame, they will be judged as art. And because of his fame, people will care (which is not necessarily a good thing).

Next under fire is Jane Seymour. The former Bond girl’s painting “centers on landscapes of odd perspectives and shaky Impressionist-influenced paintings, although one of these works apparently inspired a jewelry line for Kay Jewelers with a symbolically open heart”, Meier’s writes. According to Jane Seymour’s artist statement, her paintings constitute “an intimate world of delicate watercolors, colorful vibrant oil paintings, pastels and bronze sculptures” created over “the last eighteen years”.

Next in line is Sylvester Stallone, who “can’t be blamed for using too little paint”. But, according to Meier, “that’s about all that you might politely be able to say about his paintings”. She labels his works “rambling experiments” that “somehow made it to a misguided display at Art Basel Miami Beach”. But the Miami Art Basel is not the only place where Stallone paintings have been exhibited. There have been a number of retrospect shows recently. “You know, maybe I should have been a painter”, Sylvester

Stallone is quoted saying at the opening of his “largest-ever retrospective” in Hagen, Germany. “It sure would have meant a lot less stress”, he adds.

His “largest ever retrospective exhibit” is titled: *Sylvester Stallone: The Magic of Being*. The show was on display at the Osthause Museum Hagen until Feb. 20th of last year 2021. Stallone has had a few public exhibits of his art in the past, including a 2013 exhibition at the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and a 2015 show at the Musée d’Art Moderne et d’Art Contemporain in Nice, France.

The reaction from press and public was quick and severe. The Daily Mail published an article¹²⁶

3 Men and a Baby: When Macaulay Culkin Forms an Art Collective with Adam Green, Toby Goodshank



The 3MB Collective: Macaulay Culkin, Adam Green, and Toby Goodshank; photo by Dima Dubson.



Hellraiser Disco Luau; 5' 6 1/2" X 5' 5 1/2"; acrylic, mixed media on canvas. Photo by Dima Dubson.

Source: www.huffpost.com

titled: *Don't give up the day job... Sylvester Stallone tries his hand at fine art with mixed results* immediately after the opening of Stallone’s first show in 2009 (see image below). “But judging by the scribbled quality of the work, which includes self portraits and what looks like a line drawing of a nude woman, the 63-year-old may not want to give up his day job just yet”, the Daily Mail Reporter writes.

Next we have a group that I am tempted to label “the usual suspects”: Ringo Starr, George W. Bush, Michael Jackson, Macaulay Culkin and Lady Gaga.

“Ringo Starr’s art is based in MS Paint, and is all broad, shaky mouse-driven lines and giant paint bucket fills of color. To give him credit, he does donate all the proceeds of his art to charity and is pretty up front about it being

MS Paint amateurism, so you can’t hate on the guy too much,” Meire writes.

Former US President George W. Bush “had turned his new freetime to painting, with some surreal bathtub scenes and lots of dogs”. According to The Telegraph’s Mark Hudson “George W Bush’s first forays into painting have a naive vigour and unintentionally childlike quality.”

Michael Jackson, on the other hand, reportedly used a top-secret Santa Monica airport hangar for both a place to store his art collection and create his own work”. “As you might predict, the drawings that include idols like Charlie Chaplin, designs for a monument to himself, and pieces of furniture with faces, are kind of weird”, Meire states.

¹²⁶ Daily Mail Reporter “Don’t give up the day job... Sylvester Stallone tries his hand at fine art with mixed results. Published in 2009 and accessed on Jan 7th 2022. Internet Source. (url: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1232958/Dont-day-job--Sylvester-Stallone-tries-hand-fine-art-mixed-results.html>)

Macaulay Culkin, who has apparently had showings alongside Michael Jackson, “has launched his career into art full of weird scenes involving game shows, television figures, and other pop culture in a really trippy mess of paint.”

The objects are all “part of something called the 3MB collective operated out of his multimillion dollar apartment-turned-studio.”

In reaction to Culkin’s public debut as a visual artist in 2012, Huffpost published a Daniel J. Kushner article titled: *3 Men and a Baby: When Macaulay Culkin Forms an Art Collective with Adam Green, Toby Goodshank*.¹²⁷

The 2012 Le Poisson Rouge exhibition reviewed in the article was Culkin's first. According to his collaborator Adam Green, “that attitude of just doing something for fun benefited the show a lot”. “It allowed us to be prolific and to work without fear.”

“Even with all the thematic non sequiturs and “low brow” imagery - and perhaps because of it - *Three Men and a Baby* seem acutely aware of their distinct interplay with highbrow art and the implications of that relationship,” Kushner writes.

It is possible that this “acute awareness” and the fact that Culkin created these pieces in collaboration with two visual artists, makes for a “softer” reception by the public. A thorough search around different forums yielded hardly any negative content in regards to Culkin’s visual arts debut.

Last but not least on Meier’s list is Lady Gaga. “It’s hard to argue that Lady Gaga isn’t a skilled marketer/performer and the spectacles she creates definitely have a hyper visual level for our 21st century weary eyes”. “But does it warrant these kinds of statements?” Meire asks. Here she refers to Lady Gaga’s PR statement, which states that Lady Gaga “isn’t the anonymous hookup facilitator you might assume from her robotically decadent techno hits but, rather, a savvy media manipulator engaged in an elaborate, Warholian pop-art project.”

The Guardian’s reaction¹²⁸ to this announcement by Lady Gaga is more of a mixed bag.

“Cynics may wonder whether the move towards a legitimate artworld platform is simply a strategy to refresh the Gaga brand. And yet the connection with pop art has credibility, not only because of her ironic epigrams about “lying profusely” in interviews, or her preoccupation with fame (her bestselling debut album of 2008 was called *The Fame*), but because she has picked up on abiding themes in the work of Warhol, the artist who once said: “Making money is art, and working is art, and good business is the best art.”

Call me a “cynic”, but I find it hard to disagree with Meier. Lady Gaga’s attempt at self-mythification is breathtakingly obvious. Picasso invented this move. The likes of Koons and Hirst perfected it (see 6.1 *The Man The Myth*). By now, we know what it is and what it looks like.

Whatever one’s opinion of Lady Gaga’s work may be, when it is marketed in the context of her “ironic epigrams about “lying profusely” in interviews”, her “preoccupation with fame” or her intended association with an artist who said that “making money is art”, it is hard not to question it. After all, in a global market where billions of people have access to the same information, the

¹²⁷ Kushner, Daniel J.: “3 Men and a Baby: When Macaulay Culkin Forms an Art Collective with Adam Green, Toby Goodshank”. Published by huffpost in 2017, accessed Jan 2022. Internet Source. (url:https://www.huffpost.com/entry/orms-an-art-collective-wi_b_1858169)

¹²⁸ Thorpe, Vanessa “Pop star or avant-garde artist? Lady Gaga wants to be the next Warhol” Published in The Guardian in 2013, accessed Jan 2022. Internet Source. (url:<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/aug/18/lady-gaga-artpop-album-avant-garde>)

art has to speak for itself. Under such conditions, one's fame and crafty PR campaigns may not be enough.

It has been nearly a decade since Culkin's, Stallone's, and Jay-Z's attempts at art. Negative responses haven't discouraged other celebrities from attempting the same. The list has grown to include Bob Dylan, Jim Carrey, James Franco, Paris Hilton and many others. Looking at the continuously lukewarm responses, I notice a common denominator: predictability.

Reflecting on this common denominator, I am reminded of Colin Martindale's *The clockwork muse: The predictability of artistic change*, where the author argues that "it is the pressure for novelty that shapes individual artistic careers and trends, whether in literature, music, or the visual arts".¹²⁹ It has become obvious to me and many other scholars that this pressure for novelty has everything to do with the very real disconnect happening between Aesthetics and Art. Our "addiction to words" (see 8.1 *Aesthetics - Enemy of Art?*) is depriving us of truly experiencing art, and because of that, we are demanding a continuous supply of "new things" in order to be sufficiently entertained.

Chapter 8: Saving Art

In a recent ArtReview article titled *How To Save Art from the Artworld's Spin*, Martin Herbert reflects on an artworld "currently set up to filter the numinous experience of art through language". "Yes, I am a critic", he states. "I derive my livelihood from pasting words onto art. I see the potential contradiction. But I'm not arguing against interpretation; just against the prison of priming."¹³⁰

Even as an art critic, Herbert sees "the pretentious side of the language around art" as "comedic". He warns against this addiction to language which prevents us from truly experiencing art. "Some critics I know make a point of never reading the press materials, or at least they assert as much; but some artists nowadays are banking on your doing so," Herbert writes. But according to him, this is just "the least worst strategy".

"Getting used to that is almost a form of detoxing, because language can become a form of addiction, one you might recognise if the first thing you do each day is reach for your phone, scan your socials or the news. It's a way around the effort of having to think for yourself, or simply be alone with your thoughts, your guesswork, your raw experience."

It is hard to disagree with Herbert, but what is the remedy? Maybe by introducing artistic failure back into the equation, we may reach a new level of understanding for art and its purpose. Maybe, by once again bringing forward the transformative role of art as the ultimate truth-teller, we may save it from its history and the artworld. Who cares if art historians such as Lynton think that such a goal is nothing but superstition. We, the artists and dreamers, have been called worse. We are "unemployable", "delusional", "obsolete", and the worst one yet — "products".

All in all, "superstition" is really not that bad.

¹²⁹ Martindale, Colin. *The clockwork muse: The predictability of artistic change*. Basic Books, 1990.

¹³⁰ Herbert, Martin: "How To Save Art from the Artworld's Spin" Published in ArtReview in 2021, accessed Jan 2022. Internet Source. (url:<https://artreview.com/how-to-save-art-from-the-artworld-spin>)

8.1: Aesthetics - Enemy Of Art?

“No one asks what Mozart means. Or an Indian raga or the little tripping dance of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to “Cheek to Cheek” in Top Hat. Forget about making things that are understood. I don’t know what Abba means, but I love it. Imagination is your creed; sentimentality and lack of feeling your foe. All art comes from love — love of doing something (2019:4).” — Jerry Saltz in *How To Be An Artist*¹³¹

In *Saving Art from Aesthetics*¹³² Shusterman discusses the aftermath of the nineteenth century’s metaphysical and rather hazy philosophical claims regarding art and art’s role in society. According to Shusterman, considering how “nebulous” these claims were, a radical critique of aesthetics was to be expected.

Shusterman writes: “This critique was especially sharp in Anglo-American philosophy where preoccupation with science and mathematical logic made precise analysis and formal proof the paradigm of proper philosophical thinking (1987:651).” This attack on aesthetics started as a critique of the concept of art itself. Given that art is by nature open and ambiguous and essentially contested, the making of any valid general aesthetic theory in precise analytic terms is impossible. Because of that art has no clear essence on which a clear aesthetic theory can be grounded. The closest thing it had to one was “its gift for violating all putative essences that aesthetic theorizing tried to assign it.” Traditional aesthetics was thus “written off as dreary, woolly nonsense”.

This however, did not destroy aesthetics. As Shusterman points out, the critique was “therapeutically productive” because it uncovered how energies were wasted on the grand quests for an essence and an absolute standard of objective value traditionally associated with art. In the aftermath of this attack, aesthetics evolved more into the philosophy of criticism and in this form “began to flourish and restore its philosophical respectability” to the point where a notable scholar such as Danto could declare that “the philosophy of art is the heart of philosophy”. This said, having gained its respectability, aesthetics is now facing an attack of a very different nature. The table has turned, so to speak, and rather than art making aesthetics impossible, aesthetics is making art impossible through its degradation of art and its appreciation. Shusterman’s conclusion rests on the thorough review of three books by three prominent thinkers “already long committed to the philosophical importance of the discipline, yet all representing rather different philosophical traditions or orientations” (1987:653). These are: Goodman’s *Of Mind and Other Matters*; Danto’s *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* and Heller and Feher’s *Reconstructing Aesthetics*.

The first book Shusterman looks at is *Reconstructing Aesthetics*. The book is a collection of recent writings from the so-called “Budapest school” of Marxist aesthetics. The “Budapest school” was initiated and “still largely influenced” by Lukacs. The editors Heller and Feher, were both students of Lukacs, and although Shusterman refers to the book’s authors as Heller-Feher, he notes that Feher is the dominant figure, “having either written or translated all but two of the seven papers”.

The other book, Shusterman refers to - Danto’s *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* - is in contrast to *Reconstructing Aesthetics*’s definite Marxist orientation, “albeit of the special

¹³¹ Saltz, Jerry. *How to be an Artist*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

¹³² Shusterman, Richard. 'saving Art from Aesthetics.' (1987): 651-660.

Hegelianized Lukacsian strain, and further tempered with a dose of Adorno', clearly nonMarxian. The book is, in fact, explicitly opposed to salient Marxist views on art and "deep interpretation". However, Shusterman clarifies, both Danto and Heller-Feher "are united by a deep appreciation of Hegel's philosophy of history and aesthetics, and by a keen awareness of the power and appeal of traditional (especially historiosophical) aesthetics, even when this power has had baneful consequences'. Heller and Feher go as far as to suggest that "an historiosophical aesthetic is the only significant form a post-Kantian aesthetic can take" (1987:651-652).

The third volume, that of Nelson Goodman, is on the other hand, "more radical in his rejection of traditional aesthetics".

"Almost contemptuously dismissive of its alleged dreary blindness and confusion, he hardly deigns to mention, let alone argue with or appropriate past philosophies of art, whose obsolescence through his allegedly revolutionary approach is likened to the horse and buggy's superannuation by the automobile" (1987:653).

In contrast to Danto and Heller-Feher, Shusterman adds, "Goodman's general approach could not be further from Hegel's". Why? Because, according to him, Goodman's approach is ahistorical, and also "pervasively directed by the most rigid application of the law of contradiction whose denial forms the very basis of Hegel's logic and system."

"Goodman's central idea of the plurality of worlds is entirely a consequence of his assumption that no world can admit of contradiction, so that to explain the apparent truth of contradictory statements we must invoke the reality of different worlds. As representing different and important currents in contemporary aesthetics these three books deserve serious individual attention. But it is particularly rewarding to examine them together in terms of their complex, dialectical interrelations on a number of crucial issues concerning the contemporary crisis in art, a crisis expressed with growing urgency in the proliferation of talk about the end of art in postmodernity. This nest of issues will form the focus of my review." (1987:653)

In his review of these works, Shusterman argues that art "must be saved from aesthetics". The three books have one key thing in common: all three "find the arts and their appreciation in dire straits".

In Danto's case, the book responds to what it calls "the dismal state of the artworld". The most central essay in the book is suitably titled: "The End of Art" and argues that "the successive convulsions of twentieth-century revolutions in art and art theory have brought us, in a certain sense, to the end of art, "art having become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness" (1987:653).

"Art ends with the advent of its own philosophy," Danto claims. Danto sees this as "the final act in the story of the philosophical disenfranchisement of art which Danto traces back to Plato". According to Shusterman, Heller-Feher are just as acutely aware of art's discontents.

"The modern "detachment of art from everyday life" at once creates problems for art's understanding and by the same token abandons art's reception to the pressures and motives of the marketplace of commodity production (pp. 3-4). Not surprisingly, the ultimate blame is imputed to capitalism-"a mortal enemy of the objectifications of culture." It is only because there can be "no communities in bourgeois society...that the artist can meet the public only in the marketplace" (1987:654).

Shusterman argues that these complaints about the loss of the *sensus communis* which is based on organic communities "should be tempered by recognition that there are also positive aspects of individual emancipation and autonomy gained in losing those communities'. Why? Because

these communities sustained not only art but also “oppressive hierarchical domination”. “And if the two are inseparable, perhaps freedom is a good price for the end of both”, he suggests. And he may be right in his assumption, as with the success of the modern revolution the very idea of the avant-garde became “an establishment” which leaves art at a dead end with nowhere left to go.

“Another theory, identifiable with Adorno, sees the socioeconomic administration and institutionalization of art as distorting art's very nature through the introduction of considerations of (the abhorred) instrumental reason. Connected to instrumental reason (and yet also to Adorno's question of how there could be art after Auschwitz) is the anti-art theory that the world is in such desperate difficulties that we can't afford to maintain the frivolous gratuitousness of art, whose blandishments and vision of totality provide a dangerous escape and blindness to the real world and its fragmentation.”

Accusing art of being oblivious to its surroundings is no new idea. Add the delicate problem of art and elitism and art ends up contradicting its own *raison d'être*. Shusterman asks: *How can high art survive without an elite with which it has always been associated but which is now both largely overcome by mass culture and no longer wanted?*

This very question is at the foundation of Adorno's work. It is logical to conclude that “if art demands a dominating elite then perhaps art should die.” As Shusterman notes, Feher is passionately committed to the idea (or rather hope) that art has a future. He seems to accept that art is “in ill health” but finds Adorno's argument somewhat problematic and rather inconclusive. In his aesthetic theorizing, Feher expresses hope that art has a future, but he is of the understanding that art can be saved by aesthetics (the theoretical discipline we traditionally take as trying to explain, promote, and justify art).

Nelson Goodman, on the other hand, Shusterman explains, “seems less worried about the grand question of whether art has a future but is nonetheless troubled by art's present state”. What seems to trouble him the most is what he calls “the mistreatment of the arts in our society where education for the arts is sparse, sporadic, and chaotic”. His issue is with the way works of art are treated as something that belongs in a mausoleum. “...works of art have to work under the worst imaginable conditions - that is, in a museum, something resembling an awesome mausoleum bristling with prohibitions” (1987:654).

Goodman believes that art can be saved if the hard line between the elite and the popular is “rubbed out”. This is also his challenge to the fetishism of museum art. This attack on the hypostatization of aesthetic objects is “essential to their subsequent commodification and fetishization”. Goodman insists that the fundamental question here is not *What is art?* but *When is art?*, as in *When does something function as art?*

But “Goodman's critique of art's sorry mistreatment stops, abruptly and disappointingly, short of social critique”, Shusterman states.

“This social blindness may seem endemic to analytic philosophers. For even Danto- the first analyst to suggest a 'social' definition of art in terms of an artworld, albeit a rather socially eviscerate, theoretical one (Danto 1964)- constructs his narrative of art's demise without any mention of social factors, but simply as the story of art's “own internal development.”

After so many centuries of development “under the mimetic theory which gave art a direction and standard of progress”, this direction being “to produce equivalences to perceptual experiences”, art saw at the end of the 19th century the establishment of photography and cinematography as a much better realization of this purpose. Because of that, art was forced to redefine itself as

expression. Unfortunately, this new direction did not provide the same opportunities for expression as the mimetic theory. Consequently, art “got lost”.

“Yet, since the very idea of art had already come to involve the idea of historical progress and originality, we find “the dazzling succession of art movements in our century” as an attempt to provide some sort of historical progress by constantly redefining the airy and nature of art. In short art has become its own theory and has ended or evaporated into the philosophy of art” (1987:654).

Convincing as Danto's account may be, one should also recognise that 20th century's rapid succession of art movements “equally reflects and is fuelled by late capitalist consumerism's pervasive program of early obsolescence through superficial innovation, a strategy as present in the fashion world as in the artworld”. But Shusterman sees a contradiction in Danto's theory. “If one assumes that Danto's theory suggests that art and its history have been revitalized by aesthetic theory”, he explains, “it might seem that we should expect aesthetics to rescue art from its woes.” But Danto himself, Goodman, as well as Heller-Feher all indicate the contrary, “that philosophy of art is more a threat than a savior” (1987:655).

“The indictments of aesthetics we find here are varied, but none involves the banal romantic complaints that philosophy's chill touch makes beauty fly and that “we murder to dissect.” For all these authors are wary of the suspect notion of aesthetic immediacy (dubbed by Goodman “the Tingle-Immersion theory”) and recognize that art's production and reception are always culturally mediated” (1987:655).

The one thing that hurts the most, or as Shusterman puts it: the change that “cuts the deepest”, is that “the very idea of philosophical aesthetics as having the role of justifying art, of giving it a reason external to itself, is paradoxically an implicit assertion of art's insufficiency”.

“There must be something wrong or inadequate with art if it needs such justification or grounding”, he concludes. There must be indeed.

According to the author, Goodman believed that the educational, psychological, recreational, and spiritual values we assign to art “succeed mainly by their very existence in fostering the suspicion that the arts are worthless in themselves.” Here Shusterman argues that this belief is precisely what creates the above mentioned paradox.

“But if Goodman blithely asserts that “art needs no justification in terms of anything else”, he in fact gives it one in terms of cognition; and Heller-Feher are more clear-sighted in seeing justification as inevitable in a fragmented society where art's value, if not all values, are contested.”

To this critique of philosophical aesthetics as “implicitly undermining art”, Danto adds the conspiratorial twist that “this was always philosophy's hidden agenda”. What Danto means is that “since Plato, has been vigorously engaged in the philosophical disenfranchisement of art, using aesthetic theory to trivialize and contain art so that it could not threaten or compete with philosophy; and philosophy made the same kind of disenfranchising manoeuvre with respect to another feared rival-rhetoric.”

There is that disenfranchisement of art which took two forms, Shusterman explains. One is the attempt to trivialize art by treating it as fit only for pleasure. And second being the attempts to “rationalize art as an inferior, watered down form of philosophy, alienated from recognition of itself as striving for philosophical truth” (1987:655).

But there is a light at the end of the tunnel, Danto suggests. He outlines two corresponding ways to combat these so-called “strategies of disenfranchisement”. One is “to insist that art is always

more than the sensually perceptual, since perceptually identical objects can be different works of art (such works always being constituted and differentiated from physical things by an interpretation).” And secondly: recognising the difference between art and philosophy by “aiming at the motivation of feeling and action rather than at truth or understanding”.

Although somewhat critical of it, Goodman shares, at least to some extent, Danto’s view that philosophy has “harmfully construed the aesthetic as the realm of sensuality, formalism, pleasure, and immediacy rather than a realm essentially demanding interpretive understanding.” His criticism towards Danto’s view lies in the fact that he sees this not as an intentionally malign misprision but instead as “a product of philosophical blindness deriving from some venerable but untenable epistemological dichotomies: the 'given' or immediate versus the inferred or mediate, the emotive versus the cognitive," "understanding" versus "evaluation”.

He insists, against Danto’s view, "on the cognitive aspect of art," on the essential continuity of art, philosophy, and science as primarily and "equally ways of gaining insight and understanding," where the main role of aesthetic "emotion and feeling is to function cognitively".

According to Goodman (Shusterman calls this Goodman’s “bold new conception of aesthetics”), since art and science share a "common cognitive function," "the philosophy of science and the philosophy of art are embraced within epistemology conceived as the philosophy of the understanding". He also states that "aesthetic excellence consists in cognitive effectiveness" as displayed in aesthetic symbol systems.

This account of art's value as cognition, “as affording new visions of the worlds we live in” sounds exactly like the type of “external justification” Goodman rejects as “casting doubt on art’s intrinsic worth; it is covertly reverting to the philosophical privileging of understanding which Danto sees as the first step towards art's disenfranchisement. (1987:655)”

According to Shusterman, Danto strongly condemns all pluralism as a postmodern disease: "pluralism is a bad philosophy which asserts you can do what you damned please without it mattering”.

There are several “unquestioned traditionalist dogmas” in Danto's and Heller-Feher's aesthetics, in Shusterman’s view. These are exposed by Goodman's nonhistorical pluralism. One of these dogmas is the “unwavering commitment to seeing art and its history in terms of one grand historiosophical narrative, say from Homer to Stella.”

But perhaps this is “Danto's real message”, Shusterman suggests, that “art must be saved from itself as constituted and understood not only by its traditional philosophy but by its philosophically indoctrinated practitioners and critics.”

In conclusion, Shusterman asks: *“If art has reached the end of its career as a progressive discipline, why should we want it to continue in its posthistorical stage?”* And also: *“If, as Heller-Feher and Goodman complain, works of art have become elitist fetishes of genius, removed from ordinary life and comprehension and locked away in formidable, guarded museums to be passively gazed at in admiring ignorance of what to see (thus reinforcing the public's docile acceptance of its inferior powers), then why should art deserve a future at all?”*

In the end, all three books suggest that art is worth preserving but the suggested “remedies” vary. Danto, for example, speaks about art's return to "the basic needs and human ends which it has always served”, and more clearly of “art's special power, like rhetoric's, to move man's mind to feeling and action.” He also suggests that “art in its most disturbational avant-garde and counter-cultural forms can give us a glimpse into the powerful pre-philosophical past of art, restoring to art [and the world] some of the magic purified out when art and the world were tamingly redefined by philosophy.

Heller and Feher, one the other hand, seem “much more concerned with society”. They insist that art must be preserved “because of its great potential for close communication and creation of community”. “Moreover, in its vision of beauty and totality, art serves (somewhat paradoxically) both as an implicit, consciousness-raising criticism of society's disarray and fragmentation, and as a cathartic relief and escape from its evils.”

“For all his pragmatist pluralism, Goodman here courts a cognitivist essentialism reducing all value to understanding, which is valued not for its practical service to survival and success, but for its being "what makes survival and success worthwhile". This is most charitably construed as overcompensation for the tradition of minimizing art's cognitive import”.

In conclusion, Shusterman writes: “Our contemporary aestheticians thus concur that art should have a future, but it needs an improved one by escaping the constraints of its philosophical past” (1987:657).

8.2: Scenius And The Return To The Real

Returning to Hegel and the idea of Art moving away from the Spirit, from a time when the Spirit did not need Art because Art became Thought itself (art historical account of the period from 20th to 21st century) to current time when the Real is making a return and the demand for authenticity is increasing, it becomes clear that the removal of artistic failure plays a key role in how the so-called “artworld” treats art and its creators.

While working on a film project in collaboration with the photographer, artist and filmmaker John Paul Bichard, I realised something that changed my perception of artists and their role in society - with the disappearance of metanarratives, it became necessary for all creators to accept sole responsibility for the stories they tell. There is nothing but humanity left to bear the responsibility of creation. With nothing and nobody to lean on, each and everyone of us has to shoulder the responsibility for one's own existence. This can be breathtakingly hard for many to accept. And it should be. Because there is a purpose in finding one's context without the help of metanarratives.

Here, I am being reminded of something I read many years ago. There is a famous story told in Chassidic literature that addresses the conundrum of accepting atheists into the Christian context¹³³.

The Master teaches the student that God created everything in the world to be appreciated, since everything is here to teach us a lesson. One clever student asks “What lesson can we learn from atheists? Why did God create them?”

The Master responds “God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all — the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that God commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right.”

“This means,” the Master continued “that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should

¹³³ Buber, Martin, Tales of Hasidim Vol. 2, 1991.

never say "I pray that God will help you." Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say "I will help you."

Why am I thinking of this now? Because, with the disappearance of metanarratives, we all became atheists in a way, regardless of the depth of faith we as individuals claim to have. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a major game-changer. Why, you ask. Well, because all of a sudden, we all need to "pitch in", which leads me to the main topic of this chapter - the concept of 'scenius'.

As mentioned in Eduardo De La Fuente's *TheNew Sociology of Art: Putting Art Back into Social Science Approaches to the Arts Cultural Sociology*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once quipped that "sociology and art do not make good bedfellows."¹³⁴ What gave fodder to his reasoning was the tension between the artworld's desire to focus on individual creative genius, and sociology's persistent aim to explain phenomena in terms of social forces. Sociology was busy trying to answer questions like: *Who and what defines art and quality* (See Chapter 3 *The Rights to Subjectivity*)? *Which institutions matter and how are they accessed? Who knows whom? Is advantage accumulated from a prejudiced past? What are the mechanics behind that? Where lie the conscious and subconscious biases of culture and how do they interrupt economic valuation?* Sociologists ask these questions in order to be able to explain greatness. It is not a denial of quality, talent, innovation, or genius, but a way to contextualize them (1993:139).

This persistent focus on the individual creative genius will never cease to amaze me.

In chapter 4.5 *Picasso's Failure* I mentioned Berger's attempt to place Picasso in the context of the ecology of talent that made his recognition as a genius possible. In *Picasso's Failure*, I look at Cohen's analysis of Berger's critique of Picasso. As mentioned, Berger sees Cubism as "the outcome of Courbet's materialism and Cezanne's method of looking at nature". Also, given the choice of subject-matter and new materials and new techniques used, Berger points out that Cubism can be seen as a way to express modernity. Berger admits that Picasso was the leader of that particular group of forward thinkers but makes a point in saying that it was rather Picasso's contemporaries and friends Apollinaire, Braque, and Gris who "sensed the historical convergence which made Cubism possible". It was Apollinaire, Braque, and Gris who, rather than Picasso, belonged and were committed to the modern world.

In her book *Montmartre: Picasso, Matisse and the birth of Modernist art*¹³⁵ Sue Roe looks at the ecology of talent that gave birth to modernism.

When describing the ideas that united the first modernists (in Spanish Catalonia), Roe quotes a modernist's speech: "... they announced their aims and intentions: to translate eternal verities into wild paradox, to extract life from the abnormal, the extraordinary, the outrageous, to express the horror of the rational mind as it contemplates the pit". She adds, "... they had all read Nietzsche and Rimbaud, and continues the quote: "We prefer to be symbolists and unstable, and even crazy and decadent, rather than fallen and meek." Unfortunately, she concludes, "as John Richardson points out, they were none of them sufficiently skilled to be able to transpose such ideas into paint... except for Picasso." (2016:24).

It was apparent to Richardson and Roe that Picasso was possibly the only one in the group with sufficient enough skills to be able to transpose at least some of these ideas into paint, but I wonder if Picasso would have been aware of any of this if he was not part of this group. Picasso's

¹³⁴ De La Fuente, Eduardo. "TheNew Sociology of Art": Putting Art Back into Social Science Approaches to the Arts." *Cultural Sociology* 1.3, 2007: 409-425.

¹³⁵ Roe, Sue. In *Montmartre: Picasso, Matisse and the birth of Modernist art*. Penguin Books, 2016.

aggressively competitive personality is well documented and he often spoke about the way competition motivated him, so I ask: *Would Pablo have become the famed artist Picasso without the ecology of talent which motivated him, through nurture, sense of belonging, competition or otherwise?*

“My inner self”, Picasso once said, “is bound to be in my canvas, since I am the one doing it... Whatever I do, it will be there. In fact, there’ll be too much of it. It’s all the rest that is the problem.”¹³⁶ By all the rest, Picasso meant the world of Montmartre and its occupants. He painted it, seen through the prism of “his inner life” yet “responding, too, to the ideas and emotional lives of those who gathered there in the beginning of the 20th century - Matisse, Andre Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, van Dongen, Modigliani, couturier Paul Poiret and writer Gertrude Stein”. “All the rest” was “the plethora of challenges set by the changing social climate, their awareness of the art of the past, the technical demands presented by their rapidly emerging ideas - would increasingly make claims on them.” (2016:12)

The ecology of talent that raised Picasso was larger than the group of artists he called his friends. Roe writes: “... the leading artists of the twentieth century spent their lives living among acrobats, dancers, prostitutes and clowns. Their spontaneity, libertine lifestyles and love of popular culture contributed to the bohemian ambience of haute Montmartre and to the development of path-breaking ideas (2016:12).

“New relationships suddenly seemed possible”, she continues, “between artists and their patrons, their dealers, their lovers - and among the artists themselves.” Those who gathered in Montmartre after the turn of the century “soon became competitive and sometimes combative, falling regularly in and out with one another, discovering, exchanging and strategically guarding original ideas. They sought personal freedom and innovative creative directions, yet they were not without nostalgia” (2016:13).

“More significantly, in forming new methods and ideas, the artists also drew on the art of the past - El Greco, the Italian primitives and the classical art of ancient Greece. When African and Indonesian masks and carvings began to spread in Paris, the excitement they caused was heady, and lasting.” “As the decade unfolded, artists continued to spur one another on, forming allegiances, making discoveries, sparring and changing sides. Derain and Vlaminck, still painting together in Chatou, a suburb in Paris, in 1900, began to follow Matisse; by 1910, the ideas they were calling into question were Picasso’s. Braque was a friend of Marie Laurencin (the only female painter in their circle) before he began working closely with Picasso - who loathed her” (2016:14).

Although the Montmatre of the early 20th century is long gone and it will always remain in the past, the type of ecology of talent that Roe describes in her book, if nurtured, can exist in any place on earth, at any point in time.

Ecology of talent, or *scenius*, is considered by an increasing number of thinkers as the only way to save art from itself. Why is that? In order to answer this question we need to examine what *scenius* actually means in this context.

Social systems based on creativity differ from all other social systems, such as family, workplace, society, et cetera, in one major way: while other social systems strive towards homogeneity, social systems based on creativity encourage differences¹³⁷. This is the very key to the *scenius* question. No other social system offers what one’s ecology of talent offers. Contrary to the myths created

¹³⁶ Parmelin, Hélène. *Picasso dit...: suivi de Picasso sur la place*. Les Belles Lettres, 2013. p:70

¹³⁷ Sosa, Ricardo, and John S. Gero. "Creative Social Systems." *AAAI spring symposium: Creative intelligent systems*. 2008.

by the artworld in its strive to preserve itself, it is your ecology of talent that raises you and not the artworld with its mechanics of power.

The term *scenius* (or communal genius) was coined by Brian Eno. In an MOTA (Museum of Transitory Art) interview, Eno explains: "Although great new ideas are usually articulated by individuals", Brian Eno states, "they are always generated by a community."¹³⁸

"What I see is the waste... the waste that we make of that possibility of cooperative intelligence. Being an artist I hear a lot of talk about genius, which is the process of singling out certain individuals in art history and saying: these are the important people... Picasso, Schostacovitch, Rembrand, whatever... Whenever you look at any of those artists, you find that they lived and drew from a very very active and flourishing cultural scene."

I too see the waste. Growing up in a society founded upon the idea of collective achievement, I never understood this fascination with individual achievement that so permeates western culture. From the very beginning of my career as a professional maker of all sorts of things art, I adopted an attitude that would allow me to co-create and nurture my own ecology of talent so that it can nurture me.

I am convinced that Brian Eno is right and *there is no art without an ecology of talent*.

Conclusion

As discussed in *Chapter 1*, the Hegelian view (the "death of art" theory) dramatically changed the philosophical landscape surrounding Art and its place in society. According to Arthur Danto, Art is really over with, having actually become "transmuted into philosophy" (1986:86) rather than being part of it. In *Why does art need to be explained?* (1996), Danto explains that ***it is no longer about what our view of the world is but how we comprehend our world***.

While recognising the logic behind Danto's conclusions, I wondered if such a simplified view of Hegel's theory was a sufficient enough platform for understanding Art in the context of contemporary life. For one, there are pockets within Contemporary Art where Absolute Truth still seems to reside as artists themselves assign a spiritual truth-telling purpose to their own existence in the world. The Hegelian view also begs the question: "Now what?" If these men were right, ***if Art is indeed dead, done with and buried, then what happens next?***

But what about Failure? As mentioned in Chapter 1, Desmond's position on "the ultimacy of failure" is that of "the experience of failure as a negativity on which instrumental mind breaks". The massive concern, Desmond claims, is that history seems to have a problem with finitude and that is "a clear indication of the fermenting of failure in contemporary thought" (1998:288-289). The blame for this failure of the ethical falls on the failure of utilitarianism to answer the issues of modernity. He continues the thread by arguing that looking at religion and the religious, the "death of God is the scandalous sign blazing over the entrance to ultimate metaphysical failure" (1998:289).

Desmond sees the Hegelian "death of art" as the epitomisation of this sense of failure with respect to being aesthetic.

¹³⁸ Source: YouTube published 2021, accessed Jan 2021 (url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77mbz2HbY5Y>)

At the end of that chapter, I asked if we would be able to “stop Art from being extinct”, which led me to “the loss of the real” (see chapter 1.2).

As stated in chapter 1.2, the notion of art having this capacity for continuously replenishing its meaning, examined and described by theorists such as Clark and Valéry, but also Virginia Woolf in *The Art Of Biography*, appeals to me. How can something that behaves like that be dead?, I asked. Virginia Woolf called it *fertility*. "The creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders"¹³⁹, she said, concluding "...and we have need of that fertility" (2009:777).

As Nietzsche predicted, nihilism's impact on the culture and values of the last century has been felt, with all its apocalyptic doom and gloom and an unhealthy dose of societal anxiety and rage. As I mention in chapter 1.2, Nietzsche's predictions about the epoch of postmodernity were astonishingly accurate. But there is another, often forgotten belief of Nietzsche's - that despite the corrosive effects of nihilism, we will eventually work through it. This belief was based on the assumption that if we survived this horrific (but maybe also cathartic) process of destroying all interpretations of the world, we could then perhaps discover the correct course for humankind. From that idea stems Baudrillard's idea of *Metamorphosis*, which puts an end to the mode of language i.e. the possibility of communicating meaning, that being *metaphor*. For Baudrillard, *Metamorphosis* is a "process without Subject, without death, beyond any desire" (1993, p.103).

This was precisely where I stumbled upon the idea of the metamorphosis of art itself. Nietzsche's belief that despite the corrosive effects of nihilism, we will eventually work through it, gave me hope. Although there was the big IF in his assumption that we'll eventually “work through” nihilism, the idea of this being a necessary but cathartic journey truly appealed to me.

But back to Failure... In chapter 3 *The Rights To Subjectivity*, I discuss the disregard of failure as a key aspect of discovery. While listening to my students talking about feeling disillusioned with their art studies, it became obvious to me that failure was wrapped up in fear to the point where it was completely detached from their art practice. Being pressured to succeed in everything no matter what and, more importantly, being measured solely by one's level of “success” rather than what was learned during exploration, made failing irrelevant to the narrative of my students' identities.

Pondering over the obvious negative consequences of such disregard of failure, I asked: How can we ever be the hero of our story if there is no failure? There, I was reminded of Nietzsche's view of humans as "the unfinished animal" (2016:292). Being born incomplete, he thought, is "our nature to strive". "To strive is to envisage a desired goal and to stretch the self to it. Transcending our limitations, we become concentrated in our endeavors and channel our energies towards the end we elect. If we attain the end, our venture is crowned with success" (2016).

Following Nietzsche's reasoning, **there can be no success without failure**. Learning how to live is learning how to “stretch the self” towards our desired goal, meaning we need to learn how to fail. People do unimaginable things to avoid failure even if it means doing absolutely nothing.

This said, Nietzsche's theory does not explain why the artworld is structured in this peculiar way, which is why I embarked on a journey exploring Otherhood.

At the end of chapter 3 I was reminded of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Bright-sided*, where she states that positive thinking is a North American affliction, “a mass delusion” that emerges out of a combination of American exceptionalism and a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions (2009:13)”

¹³⁹ Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography", in *Collected Essays*, London: Hogarth vol. IV, 1967 in Danchev, Lisle. Introduction: art, politics, purpose, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 2009.

It is my view that Ehrenreich offers an accurate description of what the artworld is like. There are people in it who are successful and there are all the others. And once one becomes “successful”, one can never fail. And if somehow one manages to fail, it will always be about personal failure and not artistic failure. Why? Because **personal failure is far more entertaining. Personal failure is also something one can recover from, either by apologizing or by redeeming oneself in a way of “good deeds”, or as in Van Gogh’s case, madness. This too is much more entertaining than failing at one’s artistic endeavors.**

In the next chapter titled *The Exchange*, I look at the lives and legacies of five very different artists in order to understand art history’s preoccupation with personal failure. There are thousands of examples, from historical records saturated with speculations about individual artists’ sinful-ness to today’s mediated realities where personal lives seem to matter as much or even more than the aesthetic value of one’s work. I chose to look at these particular artists because their legacies were very much shaped by exceptional events of personal nature.

Firstly, I look at Van Gogh and his infamous act of self-mutilation. He famously cut his ear off, put it in a box and offered it to a prostitute named Rachel with the words “Keep this object carefully”. This is the first of many occasions where the so-called “gift” is mentioned. As Natalie Heinrich explains in her work dedicated to exploring the man vs. oeuvre dilemma in the case of Van Gogh, “madness can become currency”. As Nietzsche famously prophesied: “Madness thus acquires value” meaning this is no longer about aesthetics “but rather a moral process, since it is the price paid by the singular individual for the salvation of his or her fellows.” There is logic to this notion of “the gift” which is innate to every sacrifice. Heinrich quotes Bataille who states that integrity and madness go hand in hand, giving Nietzsche as an example (1997:86). Nietzsche went mad “in our stead”, he claims, “thus making the integral character possible”. But madness in itself does not count. Those who went mad before Nietzsche, Bataille explains, did not do it with his “brilliance”, meaning their “gift” was not acknowledged.

Here, Heinrich asks a key question: “**But can a man’s gift of his madness to his fellow men be accepted by them, without being returned with interest?**”. And furthermore, “what could compensate for such a gift?” The answer is easy to guess, she suggests and it is, of course, “guilt”. Madness is a diagnosis and as such erases any wrongdoing and any failure that this “mad” individual can be accused of (1997:86).

The notion of this “gift” is a thread that I follow from this chapter onward. Next was Caravaggio and his much discussed “tainted” legacy.

Although it is now known that Caravaggio died of an infected wound¹⁴⁰It is still believed by many that he died of syphilis in 1610. Why? Because such death fits right into the popular story of Caravaggio “the uneducated”, “the scoundrel”, “the gamblerer” “the murderer”.

In chapter 4.2 *Caravaggio - The Criminal*, I attempt to dispel some myths regarding Caravaggio’s life and legacy, one of them being that he was uneducated (see chapter 4.2). While doing my research, it became clear to me that Caravaggio’s many character “flaws” were, for the most part, a matter of perspective. There is no way to know what exactly happened, and yet history judged him in the worst possible manner, despite his proven talent and the vast impact he had on every artist that came after him.

What could possibly justify such treatment? Well, for one, Caravaggio was not the type that would offer any “gifts” to society. There were no apologies issued or explanations given. He lived in his own truth, no matter what society threw at him. Secondly, Caravaggio was openly

¹⁴⁰ Drancourt, Michel, et al. "Did Caravaggio die of Staphylococcus aureus sepsis?." *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 18.11 (2018): 1178.

homosexual. That in itself was reason enough to label him an outlaw and a criminal, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century as well as current times (depending on where in the world one happens to be). And possibly the biggest of his “transgressions”- the fact that, when it came to painting religious motifs, Caravaggio did not follow the rules set by the church. He painted real people. Beggars became saints, a prostitute became The Virgin Mary, and so on. This was considered by most an act of blasphemy. And, guess what? Art history still hasn’t forgiven him for that. The more I dig, the more I find recently published works where Caravaggio is being criticized for not obeying the rules of the church. The most eye-popping example of such a paper is one written in 2011 by Wallace, William E. It is titled: *Caravaggio Is Not Great; Or, How Domenichino Made Improvements*. In the paper in question, Wallace talks of painted angels performing “gymnastic feats of contortion” like that is somehow a negative thing. I find this over four centuries long grudge truly fascinating.

Next under chapter 4 came a female artist from Caravaggio’s time - the recently historically “resurrected” Artemisia Gentileschi. She is another example of a great artist who should have been judged for her undeniable artistic achievements. But just as Caravaggio, she was unwilling to exchange any “gifts”, apologize or follow societal rules, which is why she was misunderstood and forgotten for many centuries.

As mentioned in chapter 4.3, Artemisia Gentilechi was raped as a young teen. When this happened to her, she did something unprecedented that sealed her fate for centuries to come - she sued her rapist, endured trial under torture (the court ordered her tortured in an attempt to force a false accusation confession out of her), and had her rapist Tassi convicted. From that day on, the details of her trial being far more entertaining than the fact that she was indeed a great artist, art history treated her like nothing but a rape victim who happened to be a painter.

As Elisabeth Cohen states in *The trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: a rape as history*: "Combining irresistibly sex, violence, and genius, like the story of Heloise and Abelard, the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi has been retold many times. So often, indeed, and with such relish that this episode overshadows much discussion of the painter and has come to distort our vision of her. (2000:48)"

The next artist under chapter 4 is Renoir, whom I chose because of the recent commotion surrounding his name. Renoir's legacy is being currently questioned for two main reasons: his “questionable” painting skills; and his explicitly sexist portrayal of women.

While Caravaggio and Gentileschi were punished by art history for not obeying the rules of a society which demanded personal sacrifice and other forms of entertainment, Renoir was rewarded for doing the opposite. Like Picasso, and many others before and after him, Renoir played the system to his advantage. He emphasised his “suffering for the arts”, put his “sacrifice” on prominent display, blamed traditional thinking for everything and put himself on the forefront of a movement which became in itself an artistic goal. All mistakes can be excused if one claims to “break new ground”.

Despite tireless campaigns by groups such as *Renoir Sucks At Painting* and recent exhibitions exposing the obvious sexism displayed in his work, in the eyes of art history, Renoir can do no wrong. At least for now...

Much like his predecessor Renoir, Picasso played the artworld game to his advantage. Picasso is the first name I think of whenever I am reminded of the various strategies used by famed artists in order to stay relevant in an artworld that is currently in the process of collapsing on itself.

He crossed a threshold at a point in his life, and from that point on, artistic failure became irrelevant even to the painter himself. While presenting an image of greatness to the outside world, Picasso did not believe in, or even like, the work he was doing. As mentioned in chapter 4.5, according to his granddaughter Marina, Picasso used to brag about buying a house with

“three pieces of crap smeared in the night”. Needless to say, no one criticized him for “smearing crap” and the pieces were sold for many millions of dollars.

In order to understand this “gift” that society demands in exchange for a chance at greatness, I proceeded to examine the relationship between **Artist** and **Oeuvre**.

As stated in chapter 5, there is an opposition between focusing on the Man and focusing on his Oeuvre. One may also discern a certain homology between these two sets of opposites. In denouncing emphasis on the man, one denounces devotion. At the same time, the tendency to personalise artistic greatness "fits into sanctifying forms of the hagiographical tradition" (1997:63-64).

It is clear from the works of, among others, Natalie Heinich, that every celebration of a singular person as a hero comprises two contrasting principles of imputing greatness: a “personalistic” principle, which reduces the action or oeuvre to its author's intrinsic merit; and a principle that could be called “operationalistic”. The latter raises the authors up to the level of action or oeuvre that is extrinsic to them. And, at one end of the spectrum, Heinich concludes, **personalising the great man makes up in proximity to ordinary values for what has been lost with respect to the specificity of his actions or works**. So, by focusing on the personal, society “takes it down a notch” and brings it to the level of “the masses”. The expression “celebrities are just like us” fits very well here. It is something we need to believe in order to avoid feeling inferior, because the belief in one’s potential is central to a society such as ours, as Ehrenreich points out (2009:13) and we cannot allow feelings of inferiority to get in the way of “the dream”.

But, as we’ve seen so far, not everyone who is great gets to be Great. Who or what is to blame for that?

According to my research and the interviews I have conducted with Paul Kneen’s help, “doing what is expected”, as G.A. Simcox suggests, seems to still be perceived as a requirement in the artworld. But, G.A. Simcox’s is one excruciatingly simplified view where the artist gets to bear the entire responsibility for their fate, and we all know that this is not how this works. Because with globalisation, migration and socio-economic change in the contemporary artworld, expectations have become frustratingly blurry. Also, success has become notoriously difficult to define. It is my belief (shared by many, according to the interviews) that **the artworld view of success as something that can only be defined through monetary means, is a discourse that needs to be dismantled because it contradicts creativity in every possible way**.

In an attempt to connect this commonly accepted definition of artistic success synonymous with monetary gains¹⁴¹ with the Hegelian view of Art’s failure, I ended up thinking that if the original purpose of Art is to be the absolute truth-teller holding a mirror to humanity, then there can be no life after death for Art unless this purpose is somehow regained or Art is transformed to serve an equally grand purpose.

What became of Art is nowhere near an equally grand purpose. Creating something for the sole purpose of making money is far from divine or grand. Allowing Art to become “human” again, as in truthfully reflective of the human condition, is maybe what this new grand purpose may be. This said, serving such a grand purpose would mean a total transformation of the artificial construct that is the artworld.

It is my conclusion that changing our understanding of failure is key here. **Acknowledging failure as part of the creative process and moving away from art history’s preoccupation with**

¹⁴¹ This came up in the Paul Kneen interviews very clearly.

personal failure is necessary if Art is to become “human” again and, ultimately, continue to exist.

But before we can do any of that, we need to revisit outdated but still potent discourses from the past.

Back to Schjeldahl’s statement, mentioned in 4.5 *Renoir Sucks At Painting*. At the end of his article reviewing the Renoir-themed Clark exhibit, Schjeldahl states that one cannot question Renoir without questioning the logic of Modernism. My response to his statement was that it may be time to question Modernism and the ideas that gave it legitimacy, especially the backlash against the emancipation of women and the Suffragette movement in the beginning of the 20th century, thoroughly documented by Pollock and Parker in their book *Old Mistresses* (1981). This backlash was central to Modernism and the making of artists like Renoir, Degas, Gauguin and Picasso.

Questioning Modernism may be necessary if we are to “reinvent” art and give it new legitimacy. The massive removal of female artists from art history in the beginning of the 20th century happened in parallel with Modernism. The idea that women do not belong in art history was central to Modernism and we all lived to regret the consequences of that, including myself. It is my belief that we need to revisit our past and look at it objectively in order to have a future.

In order to understand failure, I searched for examples of publicly acknowledged artistic failure. The obvious place to look was amongst the rich and famous. The list of famous people making public attempts at contemporary art is long and growing longer by the minute. Most of them have received responses ranging from lukewarm to negative. While reviewing these responses, I found a common denominator: predictability.

Reflecting on this common denominator, I was reminded of the Martindale quote “it is the pressure for novelty that shapes individual artistic careers and trends, whether in literature, music, or the visual arts”. It became obvious to me that this “pressure for novelty” is closely related to the very real disconnect happening between Aesthetics and Art. Our “addiction to words” (see 8.1 *Aesthetics - Enemy of Art?*) is depriving us of truly experiencing art, and because of that, we are demanding a continuous supply of “new things” in order to be sufficiently entertained. This led me to my next question: **Does art need saving from aesthetics?**

As I mention in chapter 8, having gained its respectability, aesthetics is now facing an attack of a very different nature. The table has turned, so to speak, and rather than art making aesthetics impossible, **aesthetics is making art impossible through its degradation of art and its appreciation.**

I base much of my reasoning in chapter 8 on Shusterman’s review of three books (Goodman’s *Of Mind and Other Matters*; Danto’s *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* and Heller and Feher’s *Reconstructing Aesthetics*). All three books discuss the complicated relationship between art and philosophy, and all authors, including Shusterman, suggest that art is worth preserving. The suggested “remedies”, however, vary. As mentioned, Danto speaks about art’s return to “the basic needs and human ends which it has always served”, and more clearly of “art’s special power, like rhetoric’s, to move man’s mind to feeling and action.” Heller and Feher, on the other hand, insist that art must be preserved “because of its great potential for close communication and creation of community”.

In conclusion, Shusterman writes: **“Our contemporary aestheticians thus concur that art should have a future, but it needs an improved one by escaping the constraints of its philosophical past”** (1987:657).

I find Heller-Feher's view that art "must be preserved because of its great potential for close communication and creation of community" very fitting my own conclusion that there is something to be said about the symbiotic nature of the relationship between art and community. In my last chapter *Sceneus And The Return Of The Real*, I speak of scenius versus genius, i.e. the pitfalls that come with western society's obsession with individual greatness.

The term *scenius* (or communal genius) was coined by Brian Eno. In an MOTA (Museum of Transitory Art) interview, Eno explains: "Although great new ideas are usually articulated by individuals", Brian Eno states, "they are always generated by a community."

Ecology of talent, or *scenius*, is considered by an increasing number of thinkers as the only way to save art from itself. Why is that? Partially because social systems based on creativity are the only social systems that encourage differences. This is the very key to the *genius* versus *scenius* issue. No other social system offers what one's ecology of talent provides. ***Contrary to the myths created by the artworld in its strive to preserve itself, it is our ecology of talent that raises us and not the artworld with its mechanics of power.***

In conclusion, it is apparent to me that recognising artistic failure as a necessary aspect of artistic development is key to the transformation process that needs to happen if art is to continue to exist.

Our "addiction to words" (see chapter 8.1 *Aesthetics - Enemy Of Art?*) is something else that needs to go. Our need for explanations disconnects us from truly experiencing art and enables the artworld to support its elite.

This artworld of ours has set certain conditions in order to enable the existence of an elite and the exploitation of everyone else. After several years of conducting research on the topic, it is my belief that these conditions are best fought by moving away from the cult to the individual and towards the ecology of talent. ***Without this necessary shift there will be nothing but waste and continuous disenchantment with art and its creators.***

★