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## Art: A Brief History of Absence

(From the Conception and Birth,  
Life and Death, to the Living Deadness of Art)

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**Abstract** *This essay focuses on the logic of the aesthetic argument used in the eighteenth century as a conceptual tool for formulating the modern concept of “(fine) art(s).” The essay also examines the main developments in the history of the art of modernity which were initiated from the way the “nature” of art was conceived in early modern aesthetics. The author claims that the formulation of the “aesthetic nature” of art led to the process of the gradual disappearance of all of the formal elements that had previously characterized the visual arts; the result was “emptiness” or “nothingness” as art. The author refers to this process in terms of “vanishing acts” that allow for the formulation of an aesthetics of absence in connection to twentieth-century art (complementing the Ästhetik der Absenz, formulated in German art theory). The author also briefly addresses the consequences that these processes have for the way contemporary art, and art world operate.*

**Key words:** *aesthetics, aesthetics of absence, autonomy of art, beauty, modern art, vanishing acts, emptiness, end of art*

### Prologue

If one reads a general survey of art history, the first impression one might receive after reading the chapter on the twentieth century art is that most, if not all, of the elements that characterized artworks in the previous chapters have disappeared. Those familiar with the variety of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century artistic practices know that there are no any *a priori* expectations as to what the art of our time should look like; it can look like anything, everything, and nothing. This is the reason why many non-specialists, but also artists, art theoreticians, and art lovers with a more conservative taste, find it difficult to accept that much of this art is art at all.

Some of these changes in the visual arts over the past hundred years or so are, in my view, the result of the way “art” was envisioned at the very beginning of modernity. My claim is that the character of the development of the majority of modern art practices was profoundly influenced

by the logic of the “aesthetic argument” on art, which began to obtain its shape in the mid-eighteenth century. The aesthetic argument (whose formulation was a joint effort on behalf of aesthetics/philosophy of art, art history, and art criticism) gave birth to the new *concept* of art as a distinctly modern phenomenon. The later development of this argument in the course of the nineteenth century, culminating with *Formalism* in the early twentieth, made art an autonomous, self-referential entity.

In this paper I want to address two basic issues. I want to explain the phenomenon of “vanishing acts” within modern art as a process of the gradual disappearance of all of the major elements that characterized visual arts in the pre-modern and early modern period. My claim is that this process, which spans over a longer period of time and includes a variety of artistic strategies, movements and techniques, has its roots in early modern aesthetics and the character of the “aesthetic argument” which gave birth to the new concept of “(fine) art” as a distinctly modern phenomenon.

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### The Aesthetic “Nature” of Art

“Art” is one of the most characteristic inventions of modernity. “Art,” as this concept has been commonly understood in the history of modern “Western” culture, was invented in (Western) Europe in the early modern period. Just like modern ideas of “rationality,” “science,” “nation” or “free market,” “art” became an important point of reference for the entire modernity, a new social function that served to accommodate the whole spectrum of ideas, needs, fears and expectations that were, consciously or subconsciously, projected onto it, often in a paradoxical manner.<sup>1</sup>

The word “art” had very different connotations in the pre-modern periods, compared to the modern understanding of this concept. What “art” (Gr. τέχνη, Lat. *ars*, It. *arte*, Germ. *Kunst*, Serb/Croat. *um(j)etnost*) primarily implied were the types of human activities that we would nowadays call “crafts.” That means that the concept of “art” denoted productive activities, the work executed mostly manually, with a certain amount of skill and knowledge necessary for *making* something.<sup>2</sup> The word could also refer to something “artificial” (made by human hands) as opposed

1 The genesis of this concept is very complex and one cannot attempt to examine it thoroughly within the limited space that this paper allows. For a more detailed account on how the concepts of *techne*, *ars*, *creation*, and *genius* (talent) were integrated into the modern concept of art see Džalto 2009, 13–33; Džalto 2010.

2 For the basic etymological reference on the Greek τέχνη and Latin *ars* see: Lidell, Scott 1996, 1784–85; Lewis, Short 1958, 166–167; Maltby 1991, 54–55.

to the works of nature, which is the meaning still preserved in many contemporary languages (Eng. *artificial*, Germ. *künstlich*, Srb/Croat. *umjetno*). Finally, “art” was commonly used to describe different types of human knowledge. In this sense it was a synonym for both of our modern categories of “arts” and “sciences.”<sup>3</sup> This meaning has, occasionally, been preserved in our modern use of the word. In the English language for instance, this ancient and medieval sense of the word “art” (*ars*) is preserved in constructions such as “liberal arts” (Lat. *artes liberales*), which is still used to describe the sphere of human knowledge and activities that we also call “humanities” (as opposed to “hard sciences”). In Serbian/Croatian, the word *um(j)etnost* (art) is derived both from the noun *um(ij)ecé* (skill, technique, but also knowledge) and the verb *um(ij)eti* (to know how to do something).

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The new system of human knowledge and activities that began to emerge in the era of the Enlightenment slowly replaced the ancient categories of “mechanical” and “liberal” arts (*artes mechanicae* and *artes liberales*). The extent of the change, and the length of the process necessary for the change to become widely accepted, can be seen from the fact that the question of how to use the word “art” was still an unsettled issue in the mid-eighteenth century. Alexander G. Baumgarten, for instance, briefly addresses this issue in the “Prolegomena” for his *Aesthetica*, revealing at the same time how the concepts of “art” and “science” could have still been used interchangeably.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, the result was that instead of operating only with various types of “arts,” over the past two hundred years we have come to categorize different human activities as “crafts,” “sciences” and “(fine) arts.” The criteria for differentiating the first two of these three disciplines are, seemingly, clear and fair enough: “crafts” are primarily productive activities, having an immediate practical purpose (most of them replaced in the meantime by industrial production), while “sciences” are based on rational investigation,

3 This meaning is related to the very early, and probably original, meaning of *τέχνη* as knowledge in general (without clear, or at least without sharp, distinction between *τέχνη* and *ἐπιστήμη*), which only later became “productive” knowledge, as opposed to primarily “theoretical” one. Cf. Bošnjak 1989, 93–108.

4 In the § 10 (Objection 8), answering the potential objection to his understanding of aesthetics, that “Aesthetics is an art, not a science,” Baumgarten writes “I reply (a) that these fields are not the opposites of each other. How many subjects which were once only arts have now also become sciences? (b) Experience will demonstrate that our art can be subjected to proof; it is clear a priori, because psychology, etc. provide a sure foundation; and the uses mentioned in §3 and §4, amongst others, show that aesthetics deserves to be elevated to the rank of a science.” Baumgarten, “Prolegomena” to *Aesthetica*, quoted after Harrison 2008a, 491.

theoretical (objective) knowledge and the pursuit of (experimentally and logically verifiable) *truth*. However, in order to differentiate activities such as painting, sculpture or music from activities such as “crafts” or “sciences,” one had to come up with an *aesthetic argument*. This argument holds that human activities such as painting, making sculptures or singing are different to other “arts” primarily because their ultimate end is neither the production of something useful, nor knowledge of (objective) truth. Their purpose is rather in themselves, and the *pleasure* they provide to the one who looks at/listens to their works.<sup>5</sup>

The eighteenth century was the period in which this aesthetic argument was shaped, giving birth to the modern concept of “fine arts.”<sup>6</sup> The essence of this argument was that “fine arts” (e.g. painting, sculpture) are primarily concerned with *beauty* and *pleasure*. In spite of many nuances that one can find in the elaboration of the aesthetic argument, the core of these theories evolved around a couple of ideas: that the purpose of “fine arts” and artworks was to 1) imitate natural or ideal beauty, 2) to be itself beautiful, 3) to make the viewer experience pleasure in looking at/contemplating such beauty and the beautiful works.

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Already Leibniz explains, in a very characteristic manner, that

[T]he contemplation of beautiful things is itself pleasant, and a painting of Raphael affects him who understands it, even if it offers no material gains, so that he keeps it in his sight and takes delight in it, in a kind of image of love.<sup>7</sup>

The beauty of nature is reflected in the arts via imitation and the application of certain principles of beauty, thus enabling art to be beautiful too, even more beautiful, as it was sometimes claimed, than nature itself, by way of its formal elements, the artist’s “genius” and skill. Daniel Webb writes (in 1760) quite illustratively in this regard:

The artist, therefore, observing, that nature was sparing of her perfections, and that her efforts were limited to parts, availed himself of her inequality, and drawing these scattered beauties into a more happy and complete union, rose from an imperfect imitative, to a perfect ideal beauty.<sup>8</sup>

5 For a detailed analysis of the way the modern concept of art (or “system of arts”) was shaped see Kristeller 1951, Kristeller 1952. Cf. Wittkower, 1963.

6 Although the category of “fine arts” is much broader, including as early as the eighteenth century a variety of activities that had not normally been perceived as parts of the same category of human endeavor before, I will focus in my analysis primarily on the visual arts, as the “vanishing acts” that I address later on apply only to them.

7 Gottfried W. Leibniz on art and beauty, quoted after Harrison 2008a, 235.

8 Daniel Webb, *An Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, quoted after Harrison 2008a, 457–458. Cf. *On the Artistic Imitation of the Beautiful* by Karl Phillip Moritz (1788).

The new concept of “fine” or “beautiful” (beaux) arts appears in the title of Charles (Abbé) Batteux’s famous work *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* (1746). Batteux uses the criterion of “pleasure” and “imitation of beautiful nature” to separate “fine arts” from the “mechanical” ones. (Cf. Kristeller 1952, 20–21) We find a similar understanding of this new concept’s principles in Rond D’Alambert’s “Preliminary Discourse” for the *Encyclopedia*. D’Alambert explains that “fine arts” (beaux-arts) are called so “primarily because they have pleasure for their aim,” and, unlike the liberal arts, they are the product of an “inventive genius.”<sup>9</sup>

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That there was a significant change in this respect in the eighteenth century, compared to the previous periods, can be seen from a simple comparison with the way painting or sculpture (belonging in the eighteenth century to the “fine arts” category) had been understood during the Renaissance. For many Renaissance artists (e.g. Alberti, Leonardo), visual arts were *sciences* that required significant theoretical knowledge, such as perspective, geometry/mathematics, anatomy, biology, etc.<sup>10</sup> Although those arguments may seem strange to those who are already accustomed to the modern concept of “fine arts,” the logic of their argument becomes perfectly intelligible when one knows its social and the historical context. Arguing that painting (or sculpture) is a science, they were trying to elevate the social status of the visual artists, in order to give their occupation a more prominent place among human activities and move these “arts/sciences” from the “mechanical arts” to which they effectively belonged in the Medieval times (together with other crafts), to “liberal arts” worthy of learned and free citizens. Such “liberal arts” had to do primarily with human intellectual and spiritual capacities (“theory”), rather than with purely manual and technical skill.

The birth of (the modern understanding of) art coincides with the birth of two other, closely related disciplines: aesthetics, officially born in 1750 (the year of publication of the first volume of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*),<sup>11</sup> and art history, officially born in 1764 (with the publication of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*). Both of the authors deal with the question of *beauty*

9 Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert, “Preliminary Discourse” for the *Encyclopedia*, quoted after Shiner 2001, 84.

10 See for instance Leonardo’s argument on the range of “theoretical” knowledge necessary for the formation of the painter in his *A Treatise on Painting*.

11 The second volume would follow in 1758. The very term “aesthetics” actually appeared earlier, in Baumgarten’s thesis *Philosophical Meditations on Some Matters Pertaining to Poetry* (1735).

and *art*, as well as with the pleasure that one feels when looking at/contemplating beauty (understood as the fundamental property of the sensuous experience).

As Udo Kultermann puts it, aesthetics for Baumgarten was at the same time “a science of sensible knowledge and a theory of fine arts.”<sup>12</sup> Winckelmann also discusses art and beauty, focusing on the development of visual arts in antiquity, among which Greek art distinguishes itself for its “superiority” and “beauty,” since “among no people has beauty been prized so highly as among them.”<sup>13</sup> Beauty, understood as the fundamental property of art, becomes the justification of both the artistic practice (and its new social function) and the theoretical engagement with it.

In his works Winckelmann advocates a certain idealism of beauty, claiming that rational beings have an “innate tendency and desire to rise above matter into the spiritual sphere of conceptions” and that the “true enjoyment is in the production of new and refined ideas.”<sup>14</sup> Although Winckelmann finds in Greek art the whole range of formal elements (e.g. unity of form, proportion, simplicity) that make it “beautiful,” he points to the “idea” and “noble simplicity” which seem alone to be able to imitate (represent) “the highest conceptions of beauty.”<sup>15</sup> This way Winckelmann stays within the idealistic tradition of thinking about beauty and the beautiful but, at the same time (similarly to Baumgarten), he focuses on sensuous qualities and the sensuous experience when encountering concrete (material) artworks and experiencing their beauty. Winckelmann is also to be credited for creating the concept of (visual) “art” as an organic whole, as an entity that has its own particular development. Such a conception of art, whose peak for Winckelmann is Classical Greek art, becomes relevant for his own time, not only as a part of the general interest in antiquities, but, more importantly, for the production of modern (contemporary) art and its criteria. This was possible because of the slight, and yet crucial shift that we find in Winckelmann’s aesthetic argument. Although his theory of art still relies on the concept of mimesis, Winckelmann moves the accent from the imitation of beautiful nature (and/or ideas) to the imitation of the great art of antiquity.<sup>16</sup> This way the

12 “Für ihn war die Ästhetik gleichermaßen eine Wissenschaft der sinnlichen Erkenntnis wie auch eine Theorie der schönen Künste.” Kultermann 1987, 96.

13 Johann J. Winckelmann, *A History of Ancient Art*, quoted after Harrison 2008a, 468.

14 Johann J. Winckelmann, *Ibid.*, quoted after Harrison 2008a, 472.

15 Cf. Johann J. Winckelmann, *Ibid.*, in Harrison 2008a, 475.

16 “The only way for us to become great or, if this be possible, inimitable, is to imitate the ancients.” J. J. Winckelmann, quoted after Prettejohn 2005, 31.

beauty of ancient art becomes directly relevant for the production of contemporary art. Paintings and sculptures that were produced thousands of years before the modern concept of “art” even existed, are now incorporated into a long and continuous *history of art* and become capable of inspiring the production of aesthetic value in arts of modern times. History of (fine, visual) art becomes thus its legitimization. Art is given a historical body that can be used for the purposes of thinking about art in self-referential (autonomous) terms, as something that is distinct from all other activities and concerns.

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The classical formulation that would offer the autonomy and self-referentiality of aesthetically defined art was Immanuel Kant’s often misunderstood description of “beauty” as “purposiveness without purpose.” Although Kant’s understanding of beauty and the beautiful was not designed specifically to give aesthetic “autonomy” to the fine arts category, differentiating “beauty” in art from other types of “beauty,” it still marks the key moment in the conceptual development of the modern understanding of art and its “nature.” Kant’s argument could be (mis)understood as the seal on the aesthetic argument on art. If the utmost purpose, meaning and value of art lie in beauty and the beautiful, and if the nature of beauty is without (e.g. ethical, epistemological) purpose outside of itself, then the nature of art becomes self-referential too; it becomes an aesthetic experience with no other end. The newly born (concept of) art obtains thus its own noble purpose – *to be what it is*.

Although it would be a mistake to try to reduce apparent differences that existed between the way the concepts of “fine arts” and “beauty” were understood in various eighteenth-century authors, one can specify a couple of main elements of the aesthetic argument on art, which would continue to be the relevant, if not the dominant, theory of art until the “crisis” of the modern concept of art in the second half of the twentieth century: 1) art is an autonomous field, distinct from other human activities, 2) the nature of such art is to be found in “beauty,” sensuous perception and the “pleasure” that this perception enables, 3) apart from beauty in general, there is beauty in art, which should be imitated in order to reach perfection and eventually, even overcome imitation as such. The concepts that would also come to accompany the new category of art are “imagination” and “genius,” which characterize the new understanding of the “artist” who is capable of producing (“fine”) art.

The eighteenth century would conclude with two disciplines that made the new concept of “fine arts” their major object of analysis (aesthetics,

which would soon explicitly become “philosophy of art,”<sup>17</sup> and art history), in this way legitimizing the new category and its position within the newly-established bourgeois society.

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Although the main elements of the aesthetic argument on art were clearly developed in the eighteenth century, one can differentiate between this early stage and the later nuancing of the same argument that would come with the nineteenth century intellectual movements. In the first stage of the aesthetic argument on art, the accent was on the general concepts of beauty (and imitation of “beautiful nature”) and pleasure. As Elizabeth Prettejohn rightly remarks, “for Winckelmann beauty is not synonymous with the material characteristics of the object.” (Prettejohn 2005, 28) And yet, the “material” and formal aspects of the artwork would become the focus of the aesthetic argument in the second stage of its development. Later aesthetics would primarily focus on the beauty and sensuous properties of art itself, and would thus culminate in the *art for art’s sake* ideology and the formalist theory of art.

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Already in the first half of eighteenth century we can find positions that sound remarkably “formalist” in their focus on the pleasure and beauty that one discovers in the visual and material properties of painting, together with the artist’s skill. In the *Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715/1725), the painter Jonathan Richardson connects the pleasure that one experiences in painting primarily with its formal qualities:

The Pleasure that Painting, as a Dumb Art, gives us, is like what we have from Music; its beautiful Forms, Colors and Harmony, are to the Eye what Sounds, and the Harmony of that kind are to the Ear; and in both we are delighted in observing the Skill of the Artist in proportion to It, and our own Judgment to discover it.<sup>18</sup>

The nineteenth century theories would shift the focus from beauty in general (especially from idealist foundations of beauty) to art’s “own content,” giving the aesthetic argument its full shape. The most prominent theories in this respect are the *l’art pour l’art* movement in France, and its British equivalent (although somewhat different, as explained below) – *art for art’s sake*.

17 Georg W. F. Hegel famously claimed that the proper name of the discipline he discusses under the name of “aesthetics” should be “philosophy of fine art.” Cf. Hegel 1975, 1.

18 Jonathan Richardson, *Essay on the Theory of Painting*, quoted after Charles Harrison, *Ibid.*, 328.



The influential thought of Victor Cousin helped shape the *l'art pour l'art* position. Cousin's theory rejects the relevancy of beauty outside of art, as well as the need to imitate such beauty. In his rejection of imitation of natural beauty, human actions or the need for art to serve any other cause (e.g. religious) except its own, Cousin clearly traces the main trajectory that the core of the artistic theory of the nineteenth century would follow. (Cf. Prettejohn 2005, 71–77) Art of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would try to find out what this aesthetic argument really means in practice, in the very medium of painting.

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Theophile Gautier continues along these lines. He offers an appropriation of Kant's "aesthetic ideas," when he admits the absence of one specific, definite and definable meaning of art, claiming that art exists as a "free manifestation of beauty." (Cf. Prettejohn 2005, 67) Gautier's arguments establish a certain autonomy of art, setting up clear boundaries between art and everything that is not art (and, therefore, also between artistic beauty and beauty in general):

Art (...) expresses itself, without other preoccupation.<sup>19</sup>

Prettejohn correctly warns that the main purpose of the *l'art pour l'art* project, in its social and historical context, was not to claim "form for form's sake" as it has sometimes been interpreted, but rather to advocate a complete divorce between art and morality. (Cf. Prettejohn 2005, 98) However, the focus on the form seems to be the only consequential outcome of the *l'art pour l'art* equation. This would become clear among the (English-speaking) advocates of *art for art's sake*.

Oscar Wilde provides a very precise description of the theoretical attempts to expel from the field of art everything that is not "essential" to it. In his view, which echoes Gautier's words:

Art never expresses anything but itself! (...) Remote from reality and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection... (...) Even those who hold that Art is representative of time and place and people cannot help admitting that the more imitative an art is the less it represents to us the spirit of its age.<sup>20</sup>

Even more specific is Charles Algernon Swinburne, who claims that the sole duty of the artist is to "make good art." (Cf. Prettejohn 2005, 125) This already introduces a tension between the concept of the beautiful (as too broad and too dependent on non-artistic contexts) and the concept of

19 Theophile Gautier, quoted after Prettejohn 2005, 67.

20 Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, quoted after Harrison 2008b, 86o.

“good art” (which was sought primarily in the composition of formal elements), which would become very relevant in Formalism. As Prettejohn puts it:

[I]f art is genuinely to be “for art’s sake” *only*, then we cannot seek its value anywhere else, not even in a higher spiritual realm. (...) For Swinburne, art – and only art – contains its value entirely within itself; uniquely among the things human beings do, it does not depend on prior purposes or future consequences. (Prettejohn 2005, 126)

Concentrating primarily on beauty as something that is rooted in the formal qualities of the visual arts was a widely spread tendency. Sometimes we find very precise and explicit references to “forms” and “colors” as the “prime object of pictorial art,” as in Sidney Colvin’s writing.<sup>21</sup>

In a certain sense, the *art for art’s sake* thought was more radical than the French *l’art pour l’art*, in its rejection of any ethical or spiritual implications of art, or for associations of the artistic concerns with the beauty in general.

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The major difference compared to the earlier stage of the aesthetic argument is that the *art for art’s sake* theory was trying to understand art in a stronger opposition to all non-artistic elements, occasionally implying even a complete rejection of beauty and pleasure as normative for art. If art does not need to be anything else except “good art,” it also does not need to be “beautiful” or give “pleasure” in the conventional meaning of the word.

The development of the aesthetic argument reaches its culmination in Roger Fry and Clive Bell’s *Formalism*.<sup>22</sup> They explicitly challenge the relevancy of the concept of “beauty” in order to operate with a more precise conceptual apparatus which would better express the (autonomous) aesthetic nature of art. Fry writes that

It became clear that we had confused two distinct uses of the word beautiful, that when we used beauty to describe a favorable aesthetic judgment on a work of art we meant something quite different from our praise of a woman, a sunset or a horse as beautiful. (Fry 1920, 194)

21 “The only perfection of which we can have direct cognizance through the sense of sight is the perfection of forms and colours; therefore perfection of forms and colours – beauty, in a word – should be the prime object of pictorial art.” Sidney Colvin, quoted after Prettejohn 2005, 139.

22 The early period of “formalism” has also often been misunderstood, applying to it some of the later ideas, primarily those of Clement Greenberg. Roger Fry was particularly cautious not to reject all other elements of a work of art for “purely aesthetic quality,” or to claim the knowledge of the “ultimate nature of art.” Cf. Fry 1920, 188.

Clive Bell was interested in the properties shared only by artworks, and not by other things. To this end, he was even more resolute, substituting in his aesthetics the concept of “beauty” with the concept of “significant form.” (Cf. Bell 1914, 3–71) The reason for developing this new terminology for the aesthetic argument on art, instead of continuing to rely on “beauty” and “beautiful,” was, in part, the need to focus attention on the material and formal properties of artworks as their chief dimension, as the concept of “beauty” could be misleading. “Beauty” can point to the representational dimension of artworks, to something that art merely *represents* but not to what it *really is*, diluting the very material/formal properties of the work. However, the reason was also that

More than ever, “beauty” seemed too bland or anodyne a term to describe the gritty, deliberately ugly, or confrontational art of certain modern artists, or the abrupt strangeness, to European eyes, of the arts of Africa, the Far East, or South America. Thus a number of twentieth-century artists and critics explicitly denounced “beauty” as an artistic aim. (Prettejohn 2005, 160)

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The aesthetic argument was gradually obtaining its final shape. Its *colonizing* power – the power to apply itself to all contexts and historical periods, the power to find (modern, European, but also an extremely *rationalized* concept of) art and aesthetics in cultures and historical periods where they never existed and include them within a single (*hi*)story of art – became stronger than ever.

A late version of the formalist aesthetic argument was Clement Greenberg’s theory of “self-criticism” of the artistic media, which leads to their “purification.” Greenberg claims that not only must art (in general) demonstrate what is unique and irreducible in it, in comparison with other disciplines (and here Greenberg clearly follows the tradition of the aesthetic argument from the eighteenth century to Bell), but that each particular art must determine what is exclusive, unique and irreducible in the nature of its medium. (Cf. Greenberg 1973) In the case of painting, this is “flatness.” Through this “purification,” which is a historical process, a particular artistic discipline (e.g. painting) comes to some sort of Hegelian self-consciousness. This development, for Greenberg, results in Abstract Expressionism as the type of painting which finally operates at the level of its own (purified) medium, with the means that are exclusive to painting which no other art shares with it. Greenberg, or course, failed to see the clear political and ideological implications of his theory. Just as the aesthetic argument in general tends to present itself as disinterested and concerned “purely” with the “autonomous” nature of art, Greenberg’s

vision of Abstract Expressionism affirms a certain naivety of “pure” painting, while its disinterest and “purity” make it a very useful ideological and political weapon (especially in the context of the Cold War for instance).

And here we face the paradox of the entire project of art, envisioned in (autonomous) aesthetic terms. While the aesthetic argument pointed, in its mature form, to the formal and material properties of art as its true “nature,” it was precisely these formal elements (together with everything that traditionally characterized the medium of painting) that would vanish from art in the attempt of the artistic practice to reach and realize its autonomous, aesthetic nature. In other words, the quest for the substance of autonomous art (for “art’s own nature”) led to a greater focus on particular properties of art that were then, one by one, reduced and rejected in order to reach the “true” (“pure”) “nature” of art.

In this respect, the process of rejection of certain elements that traditionally characterized painting is somewhat similar to Greenberg’s thesis about the rejection of everything that is not “essential” to a given artistic medium. However, what Greenberg did not notice was that the very medium (of painting) is also ultimately subjected to vanishing acts, and that both the disappearance of particular elements from the painting and the disappearance of the very medium of painting within modern art are parts of the same process. In other words, there is nothing metaphysical about the “purification” of a certain medium/discipline; only a (constructed) process that is *happening* within a broader modernist construct. And yet, the very construct, and this particular process within it, turned out to be very productive. The quest for the “autonomy” of art, the necessity of defining the “nature” of art, was the reason why many artists trained in traditional media felt compelled to move to other, alternative and “expanded” media to be able to “express” their ideas. This led to some of the most innovative approaches within the history of modern art.

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### **Vanishing of (the Aesthetic Nature of) Art**

The quest for the (autonomous) “nature” of art has long been recognized as one of the main projects of modern art, and even as its major tendency. (Cf. Menna 2001) This, however, does not mean that there were not any other parallel developments in the history of modern art. It only means that many of the most prominent and innovative modern artistic strategies pursued this direction, which proved to be very fruitful. Among the reasons for this productiveness were the difficulties that many of these artistic practices faced in the attempt to pursue art’s own ends,

means and meanings, without associating it with other (non-artistic) contents and means. The problem was real – how to fulfill the requirements that the aesthetic argument presented to art, and how to respond to the questions “what is art’s own nature?” or “how does one *make* (good) art which has no other concerns except to be (good) art?” within the very artistic practice. Theory, here as it is often the case, was not following and merely explaining the practice; on the contrary, practice was following the theoretical framework which was designed for it.

To live up to the pure, autonomous aesthetic ideal, artistic practice would need to get rid of all particular elements that had characterized painting in the past, first of which was mimesis.

### Vanishing Acts I – Disappearance of Mimesis

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In the first phase of “vanishing acts” we find a gradual abandonment of the mimetic approach and mimesis as the most influential and long-living theory in the sphere of visual arts. Even though the advocates of *l’art pour l’art* and *art for art’s sake* could not predict it, and even though their claims for the autonomy of art did not require abstraction, this particular nuancing of the aesthetic argument would eventually lead to the elimination of the figurative and mimetic approach. If motifs, narratives and beauty outside art become irrelevant to the condition of art, and if art’s quality depends primarily or solely upon the arrangement of the visual elements and artistic materials, the mimetic approach clearly manifested itself as irrelevant to art’s own concerns. Moreover, if one takes Kant’s concept of aesthetic ideas seriously, especially in Gautier’s version of that argument, and holds that the absence of firm, definite, and rational ideas and meanings is the nature of both the creative process and the perception of artistic beauty, then the elimination of all narratives and the disappearance of all kinds of representation appears as the necessary step. Art must stop *representing* something, must stop *meaning* something in order to *be* what it is (art). It seems that the most prominent artistic strategies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century began their artistic adventures with this logic in mind – a logic that Maurice Denis expressed in his famous (1890) dictum that a painting

[B]efore being a war horse, a nude woman, or telling some other story – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a particular pattern.<sup>23</sup>

23 Maurice Denis, “Definition of Neo-Traditionalism,” in Harrison 2008b, 863.

Of course, the process was a gradual one. We find the first clear stage of the disappearance of the mimetic approach in the work of James Whistler, the painter who was most closely associated with the *art for art's sake* climate. In Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold* (1875) one perceives almost a completely abstract surface. The artist was not concerned with a depiction of a correct or even recognizable "reality" outside the canvas. The motif becomes virtually irrelevant to the artistic intentions. The focus is on the phenomenal aspect of the painting; a "free play" of brush strokes, paint, colors. Even when we recognize the motif, we immediately move from thinking about it to considering the much more dominant contents of the work – its purely *aesthetic* (visual) effects that take place on the surface.

Whistler's work is significant for its references to music as well. In his earlier works music becomes the topic of some of his canvases. This already signifies a move from representation of the visible reality to establishing analogies between different artistic media, between painting and music as the most abstract among the "fine arts." To *paint music* seems like a paradox, but it becomes intelligible if we understand it as a phase, as an attempt to attain the same level of abstractness in painting (by focusing on its aesthetic properties) that music has by exposing its "nature" in seemingly much more instantaneous way (in e.g. *absolute* music, as a combination of tones, vibrations of air).

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We find a similar shift from the depiction of non-artistic narratives or motifs, to the investigation of the structure and quality of visual phenomena used to create a piece in many Impressionist, Post- and Neo-Impressionist works. Impressionism destroys the solidity of depicted forms, revealing their visual and aesthetic structure. Human figures, landscapes, oranges or streets, are there not primarily as parts of the reality outside the painting,<sup>24</sup> but as aesthetic phenomena, as yellow, blue, red or green stains of color. The focus becomes increasingly (and soon exclusively) not on "what" (is depicted) but rather on "how" (something is depicted).

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24 An important issue in this context, that deserves a separate discussion, is the problem of light as, in some sense "absolute" reality in and for painting in general. Impressionism is in a very fundamental sense focused on light (as a material reality) and light effects (primarily reflections) that result in "dematerialization" of visible forms in most Impressionist works. However, although these effects are transposed in Impressionism to produce primarily visual, artistic phenomena, the fact remains that they are rooted in the visible and material reality outside the painting and must, as such, be taken into account.

Paul Cézanne and Georges Seurat are probably the most subversive artists of their generation in the way they reject the mimetic approach. Cézanne depicts objects that we find in nature, but these objects become, in a very profound sense, irrelevant to art. It seems that the very recognizable motifs are used to dismiss their relevancy for the artistic concerns. His still lifes or landscapes are abstractly constructed forms on the surface of the painting. The painting becomes a new, re-created (artistic) reality, which exposes not the structure of the objects in the world around us but the structure of the surface of the painting itself (by using the abstract forms that are derived from the observation of the visible reality). The most distinct aspect of Cézanne's painting becomes his brushwork – the structure of the strokes that are building blocks of the new, painterly reality.

666 Seurat does a similar thing, employing quite a different method. The essential structure of his compositions is also geometric, but in Seurat's case this geometry becomes a very precise, calculated structure, which, in his mature works, can almost always be reduced to exact numerical proportions (e.g. golden section). This abstract, geometric structure is then filled with another abstract element – small dots of paint that completely dematerialize the visible reality and recognizable forms, giving the forms, at the same time, a new (purely artistic) material quality. This artistic materiality is achieved by rendering visible the process of painting and the structure of the canvas. Again, what comes forth is not what is represented (what small brush strokes stand for), but what is produced in terms of the aesthetic properties of the phenomenal surface.

The final step towards a complete rejection of mimesis in favor of purely formal elements of painting was made, of course, by Vasilij Kandinsky. It is not by chance that he, similar to Jonathan Richardson and James Whistler, compares painting with music as, in his view, the most abstract of all arts. His mature works are often simply called “compositions.” Kandinsky, however, never claimed a complete and radical autonomy for art, which would separate it from the human condition. He always saw a human content and meaning in both music and painting. He saw their connection with the human “soul” and “spirit.” However, in spite of this “traditional” dimension of Kandinsky's concept of art, the fact remains that to fulfill this spiritual and/or psychological purpose, his art operated with purely aesthetic elements (abstract shapes, colors, lines). Via this profoundly sensuous experience that is not distracted by references to the reality outside us, he hoped to appeal directly to the soul.

## Vanishing Acts II – Disappearance of Visual Elements

Once the mimetic approach had been abandoned, as both an essential and useful method in the field of visual arts, the abstraction, as the newly achieved level of reductionism, went through another stage of vanishing act. Already in the second decade of the twentieth century, another Russian painter would reject the rich and complex visual language of (abstract) art to reduce it to ascetic monochrome or non-chromatic paintings. Kasimir Malevich was the first one to reject colors, various textures and multiplicity of forms, in the name of reaching the true nature of (abstract) art and a certain type of specifically artistic *mysticism*. With his “Black” and “White” squares he stylized painting to an unprecedented degree. This reduction was, again, made to enable “pure” and “free creation” in Malevich terms, signifying the chief (“suprematist”) tendency within modern art. The “new” and “pure” art requires a radical autonomy; all ties to society and the world (outside art) should be cut:

Our world of art has become new, non-objective, pure. Everything has vanished, there remains a mass of material, from which the new forms will be built.<sup>25</sup>

The consequence of this was almost a completely empty canvas, or “White on white” as a personification of Malevich’s system, which signals the main development in contemporary art and the final liberation of art.<sup>26</sup>

Another radical reduction, although quite different from Malevich’s, is achieved by Alexander Rodchenko with his monochrome paintings. With his “Pure Red Color,” “Pure Blue Color,” and “Pure Yellow Color” (1921), Rodchenko announces the “death of painting.” Apart from the primary colors, each evenly applied to one canvas, everything else has vanished:

I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation.<sup>27</sup>

25 Kasimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting” (1916), in Harrison 2008c, 181.

26 “I have ripped through the blue lampshade of the constraints of colour. I have come out into the white. Follow me, comrade aviators. Swim into the abyss. I have set up the semaphores of Suprematism. I have overcome the lining of the coloured sky, torn it down and into the bag thus formed, put colour, tying it up with a knot. Swim in the white free abyss, infinity is before you.” Malevich, “Non-Objective Art and Suprematism” (1919), in Harrison 2008c, 293.

27 Rodchenko, quoted after Bois 1993, 238.



In search for its autonomous nature, art came not only to the abstraction but to the final reduction of the very aesthetic (visual) means and properties that were used to construct the very esthetic argument, and claim the autonomy and distinctiveness of art.<sup>28</sup>

### **Vanishing Acts III – Disappearance of Manual/Skilled Execution**

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In the history of vanishing acts Malevich is to be credited for one more thing. In searching for the autonomy of painting and its nature, he does not only reduce the expressive elements of art, to their, one could say, final logical possibility, to “white on white.” Malevich takes an even further reductionist step in his radically autonomous understanding of art, and rejects, for a while, the very medium of painting. As it is generally known, he stopped painting soon after he had finished his most important Suprematist works (between 1920 and 1924), continuing his work in the form of thinking and writing about art. This way Malevich rejects one of the most persistent aspects of the entire tradition of painting – the manual, skilled execution of a piece. Painting, both as an activity and a medium, is thus rejected in the name of investigation of art’s own nature, in a *theoretical* way.

This incident is significant for another reason as well. Malevich’s abandonment of painting seems to have announced (in reference to the medium of painting) another influential idea within the twentieth century art – that *art* is primarily a *concept*, a specific *understanding* of what art is.

Another example of the vanishing of the manual aspect of art production can be found in Marcel Duchamp’s “ready-mades.” The artist does not “make” anything; he only “chooses” objects that he exhibits as artworks. This way Duchamp questions the nature of art, challenges the entire modern understanding of art as something that was based on the aesthetic argument. Material objects become merely a demonstration of the “artist’s decision” to call something art. Artistic autonomy is thus sought out on another level of abstraction, in the artist’s decisions as means of artistic creation, and the viewer’s intellectual engagement with the conceptual

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28 Empty and monochrome canvases as an artistic strategy would continue to be produced later on as well. Among many artists of the second half of the twentieth, as well as in the twenty-first century, who employed (in many different ways) this radical reduction of the medium of painting, one can point to Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, (1961), Mel Ramsden, *Secret Painting* (1967-08), Remy Zaugg, *Grundierung* (1975-77), Tom Friedman, *1000 Hours of Staring* (1992-1997), Spencer Finch, *Buried Treasure* (2003).

game that the artist proposes as to what art, in each particular context, means. The focus is thus shifted to the mental (conceptual), on the meaning of artworks, especially in the context of the modern art world. This practice culminates in Duchamp's chess plays, where the "immateriality" of the art (as a process) becomes most explicit.

### **Vanishing Acts IV – Disappearance/ Irrelevancy of Objects**

Following Duchamp's shift from the aesthetic dimension of artworks (their material and formal qualities) to ideas, Conceptual artists (primarily Joseph Kosuth and the artists gathered within the *Art & Language* group) were those who made the final step toward the reduction of the material (physical) properties of art. This aspect of the vanishing acts has been famously characterized as the "dematerialization of art."<sup>29</sup> In many ways, Conceptual art represents the culmination of the modernist quest for autonomous art and the investigation of its own "nature."

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For Joseph Kosuth, objects are "irrelevant to the condition of art" and every attempt to explore the visual aspects of art is a "pure exercise in aesthetics," which Kosuth perceives as something not only different from but actually opposite to the true nature of art.<sup>30</sup> Kosuth was ready not only to reject all objects (including ready-mades) as the necessary (pre)condition of the very existence of artworks, but to actually claim the "conceptual" nature of art.<sup>31</sup> He comes to the complete reversal of the aesthetic argument; Kosuth's equation could be summarized as following: more aesthetic properties means less art. This was possible because the modernist logic in thinking about art still operates in Conceptualism, in spite of the complete reduction of all (aesthetic) elements that traditionally characterized art (and that were used to construct the aesthetic argument). Kosuth rejects art defined aesthetically, but continues to think of art in autonomous terms, as a specific, self-referential field with its own nature that is radically different to other phenomena. Art reaches the peak of its autonomy and self-referentiality in becoming a tautology, a logical form, a proposition that "art is art." While breaking with the visual, aesthetic and material aspects of art, Kosuth's tautologies

29 Lucy R. Lippard, John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art" in *Art International* 12/2, February 1968.

30 Cf. Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy" in: *Studio International*, No. 915, October 1969, 134–137; also Kosuth 1991.

31 "All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually" Kosuth 1991, 18.

actually solidify the autonomy of art, making it in some ways “absolute.” This is the paradox of Conceptual Art, which, on the one hand, wants to reject the aesthetic nature of art (as clearly modernist and bourgeois in nature) but, on the other hand, it also wants to retain the modernist claim for the art’s autonomy. Art and speaking about art becomes a self-referential system, something that should have freed art from its market purposes, redeem it from being simply a commodity in capitalist society. This noble project ignored the fact that the modern (and thus also Conceptual) understanding of art is a product of modern society, and that, probably, art’s own (autonomous) “nature” is inextricably tied to it.

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Apart from Conceptual art, one can find another example of disappearance of material objects in the practices of performance and action art. Instead of producing objects, the artist’s own body and the actions one performs, signify the creative process and effectively become artworks in the whole range of artistic practices, such as happening, performance, body art, and actions.

### **Vanishing Acts V – Disappearance of the Artist/Artist’s Body**

The disappearance of the traditional visual properties of art, manual execution of the artwork, together with the entire material aspect of art, seems to have left only one more element to be subjected to the vanishing acts – the modern concept of the artist and the artist’s role in the creation of art.

The modern concept of the “artist,” just as art, is a modernist construct. The artist was envisioned as a “genius” and “creator,” someone (mostly *he*) who employs “imagination” and “inspiration” in his/her creative activities. In some aesthetical discourses (e.g. Kant’s), these capacities appear as vital for understanding the production of the aesthetic value and its reception.

There are a few instances of the disappearance of the artist in the twentieth century art that can roughly be divided into two main categories: questioning/deconstructing the role of the modern figure/concept of the artist, and the disappearance of the artist’s body.

To the first category belong artistic practices such as Conceptual Art, happenings or performances. In these practices the artist is very often eliminated as the sole producer of the artwork and its meaning. The modernist concept of the artist is seriously challenged when the viewer

is transformed into an artist-collaborator. In these artistic strategies, art becomes a joint activity, often resembling pre-modern, ritual-like communal activities (e.g. in Joseph Beuys's works). These practices, which came to flourish in the 1960s and 1970s, went parallel to the theoretical critiques of the artist as a modernist construct, most notably expressed in two famous essays by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault.<sup>32</sup>

To the second category belong works where the artwork is the result of the physical absence of the artist. We find such examples in the works of Richard Long's *Land Art* projects (e.g. *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967), Keith Arnatt's *Self-Burial* (1969) or Andy Warhol's *Invisible Sculpture* (1985). In all of them, the actual work of art is the result of the physical disappearance of the artist (artist's body) from the site. The artwork thus becomes something that occurs in/out of the artist's absence. (Cf. Warr 2006, 162–177)

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### Vanishing Acts VI – Emptiness is All That's Left

Yves Klein's *exhibition* entitled "Le Vide" (void), opened in 1958 in the Iris Clert gallery in Paris, is the action that reduces art to *emptiness* in a paradigmatic way. Its visitors were presented with the empty gallery; emptiness or "nothing" (apart from freshly painted white walls of the gallery) was all that was exhibited. Art appears here as being liberated not only from mimesis, formal elements of visual art, material objects or their manual execution, or the *compelling* presence of the artist; the "real" and "pure" nature of art appears as nothing, signifying the final stage of the vanishing acts. The absence, emptiness and/or nothingness that are derived from Klein's project can probably be interpreted as disclosing the real "nature" of (autonomous) art, as the aesthetic argument aspired to established it. "Nothing" becomes the final stage and a complete self-realization of art as an autonomous phenomenon.<sup>33</sup>

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Some aspects of the vanishing acts, as discussed here, have already been described in terms of the "end" of art. In the famous Arthur Danto's

32 Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur" in *Manteia*, No. 5, 1968, 12–17; Michel Foucault "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, No. 63/3, 1969, 73–104.

33 The newest reiteration of the idea of "nothing" as art represents Lana Newstrom's "invisible art" that has been interpreted both as a rather bizarre attempt to be "original" at all costs, as well as a cynical comment upon the contemporary art world and the art market. Cf. Kinsella 2014, Internet; Jones 2014, Internet.

thesis, art comes to its end when the visual, material and aesthetic properties of art cease to be sufficient for distinguishing art objects from non-art objects. (Cf. Danto 1997) For Danto this is the case both in Dadaism (Duchamp's *ready-mades*) and in some manifestations of the Neo-Dada (Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*). When art ceases to be recognizable (and *definable*) in its aesthetic properties, one needs a "theory" which would contextualize and explain something as art, and the "artworld" in which such objects can function as art.

However, one needs a *theory* to differentiate even traditional artworks (e.g. paintings) from non-art works. Visual or material properties alone are never enough; in order to accept that something is *art*, one has to accept the modern conception of art, which is based on the aesthetic argument. And that is already a *theoretical* (or, should one say, *ideological*) construction.

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*Art*, moreover, is not only a certain theory of art, it is also a social practice – a function within bourgeois society. In fact, this is precisely how one could interpret the vanishing acts and the aesthetics of absence that can be constructed based on them. One can claim that the chief reason why the project of looking for the "nature" of autonomous art ended up in a complete *void* or *nothingness* as art, is that this "nothing" is precisely what constitutes the "nature" of art as an autonomous, self-referential and aesthetically-defined entity. Let us, at the end, take a closer, although very brief look at this issue.

### The Aesthetic as the Political

One conclusion that can be drawn from the above-given, preliminary map of vanishing acts, is that both the aesthetic argument on art and the quest for the "autonomy" of art, which proceeds from it, were mistaken from the very beginning. One could conclude that "pure" art, which is entirely self-referential, concerned with its own "nature," is not art at all.<sup>34</sup> Many artists, as well as authors, over the past two hundred years, would agree with this or similar conclusions. Artists such as Picasso openly rejected this (modernist) concept of art, and claimed something quite the opposite, that art is an "offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy."<sup>35</sup> Rejecting the self-referential understanding of the "nature" of

34 The claim could be, then, that only insofar as art ceases to be reduced to its own (supposed) autonomous nature, it remains *something*, avoiding *reductio ad nihil*.

35 "What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who, if he is a painter, has only eyes, if he's a musician has only ears, if he's a poet has a lyre in each chamber of his

art, Picasso also refused to give up any of the traditional aspects of the medium of painting, in which he predominantly worked. Some elements of the mimetic approach, materiality, traditional techniques, skillful drawing, etc., all remained present in his work throughout his career.

Of course, one could draw an opposite conclusion as well, and interpret the vanishing acts and the aesthetic argument as a very subtle ideological project, which was by no means mistaken, although its real purpose was very different from the proclaimed aesthetic *purity*. One could claim that the purpose of the aesthetic argument was primarily ideological, and that the “true nature,” and the final objective of “autonomous” art were not aesthetic but political. Viewed from this perspective, art’s autonomy becomes a very useful narrative which covers up the real social function of art, its ideological and political meaning by claiming its “beauty” and “disinterest” as its true “nature.” This point can be illustrated by two examples that Larry Shiner gives in his excellent study, *The Invention of Art*. Shiner establishes a parallel between the concept of “fine,” “elegant” or “polite arts” and the “polite (social) classes” for which the new system of arts was established. (Cf. Shiner 2001, 79–98) On the other hand, he also points to important ideological issues surrounding the establishment of the Louvre as the first “national” museum of fine arts. The category of “fine arts” and the aesthetic argument which claimed disinterested enjoyment in beauty with no other purpose were used to promote the Revolutionary ideals and the newly born social elite. It was, following Shiner, precisely social and political purposes that led to the preservation of the works of “fine arts” in this period. These works were collected and exhibited as “artworks” at the “national museum,” becoming that way a part of the *national heritage*, not the exponents of the royalty anymore. (Cf. Shiner 2001, 180–186) This kind of “de-functionalizing” of paintings and sculptures, based on their “purely” aesthetic value, was a revisionist political intervention *par excellence*. The idea of “purposeless beauty” in which people could delight while contemplating the artworks exhibited in the museum, was used to de-politicize the very works from their previous function and meaning (as exponents of the monarchy and its power),

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heart, or even if he’s a boxer, just muscles? On the contrary, he is at the same time a political being, constantly alert to the heart-rending stirring or unpleasant events of the world, taking his own complexion from them. How would it be possible to dissociate yourself from other men; by virtue of what ivory nonchalance should you distance yourself from the life which they so abundantly bring before you? No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It is an instrument for offensive and defensive war against the enemy.” Picasso, *Les Lettres Francaises* (March 1945), quoted after Sullivan 2007, Internet.

while employing them, at the same time, to support the new social and political system that was taking root.

Viewed from this perspective, art would appear as a social construct, which merely conveniently exploits the aesthetic argument to justify, legitimize, rationalize and utilize its political and ideological role. One should also not forget that art was not born as merely a concept, but as a social institution, or a set of social institutions (museums, galleries, art dealers, art criticism, etc.) that had never existed before. It could be claimed that if one wants to find the “true nature” of art, one should seek it precisely in its social and ideological function, not in any immanent aesthetic or metaphysical contents and features. This approach has already been formulated in respect to the twentieth-century art (in its fullest form in the so called “institutional” theory of art), but the logic of the argument generalizes, and can be applied to the earlier period as well.

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Following Arthur Danto’s theory of the “artworld,” Georges Dickie developed his “institutional theory of art,” which successfully moves the stress from metaphysical (or aesthetic) arguments on the nature of art to the institutions that constitute the art world. In other words, Dickie successfully explains why one and the same object, when seen in a regular shop or on the street, is only that – an average, useful object, while the same object seen in a gallery or museum, is a work of art. The object remains the same (in its material, visual or aesthetic properties) and yet it is not the same, since its function has changed – it begins to *function* as an artwork, within the socio-cultural industry called “art.” Since the eighteenth century art has evolved into the whole industry of art. As such it exists as a function within modern, bourgeois society, and as a very profitable venture.

The awareness of the fact that art is a social function and that, in the meantime, it became a primarily business, grew gradually. The de-constructivist approach to the whole set of modernist “constructs,” including art, presented a significant contribution to developing this awareness, as did the vanishing acts that occurred within the artistic practice itself.

This shift of perception and understanding of art is apparent in the way the contemporary art world functions. Instead of focusing on the artists as “geniuses,” big and important art manifestations become primarily about galleries, art dealers and curators. Big “stars” are there if and when they contribute to a better marketing.

In this way the contemporary story of art is, in certain sense, a continuation of the story of art after the death of the *noble* (modernist) ideology

of art. We live in a disillusioned (art) world, where only very naïve newcomers, or rich outsiders who (just as in the movie *Untitled*<sup>36</sup>) buy their social status and prestige through “investing” in art, can believe in some profound, deep and metaphysical nature of art. Its nature is (in) its market. That is why the contemporary art seems to be a living dead – it is alive only insofar as its (autonomous) being is dead.

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36 *(Untitled)* (2009), directed by Jonathan Parker.



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## Davor Džalto

Umetnost: kratka istorija odsustva  
*(od začetka i rođenja umetosti, njenog života  
 i smrti, do umetnosti kao živog mrtvaca)*

### Apstrakt

U ovom radu autor se fokusira na logiku estetskog argumenta koji je, kao konceptualni instrument, iskorišćen u osamnaestom veku da bi se formulisao moderni pojam "lepih umetnosti". Rad takođe istražuje glavne tokove umetničke prakse u modernom periodu koji su se razvijali pod neposrednim uticajem ideje o "prirodi" umetnosti i načinu na koji je ova ideja formirana u ranoj estetici. Autor tvrdi da je samo formulisanje "estetske prirode" umetnosti dovelo do procesa postepenog nestajanja svih formalnih elemenata koji su karakterisali vizuelne umetnosti u prethodnom periodu. Rezultat ovog procesa je bila "praznina" ili "ništa" kao umetnost. Autor ovaj proces naziva "vanishing acts", što mu omogućava formulisanje svojevrstne *estetike odsustva* u vezi sa umetnošću dvadesetog veka (čime se dopunjuje i dalje razvija koncept *Ästhetik der Absenz* formulisan u nemačkoj teoriji umetnosti). Autor takođe ukratko razmatra konsekvence koje ovi procesi imaju za savremenu umetničku praksu i način funkcionisanja savremenog sveta umetnosti.

**Ključne reči:** estetika, autonomija umetnosti, lepota, moderna umetnost, estetika odsustva, teorija umetnosti, praznina, kraj umetnosti