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EVENTAL AESTHETICS  
AESTHETIC INTERSECTIONS 5  
VOL. 11 (2023)

Skies of Generations Past:  
Auschwitz, Hiroshima,  
Chernobyl, Extinction

RYAN CRAWFORD

Recollecting the Future:  
Matter, Form, and Spectral  
Violence in the Work of Pedro Reyes

JUSTIN L. HARMON *and* ENRIQUE CHACÓN

John Dewey's Philosophical Naturalism and  
a Pragmatist Approach to Conceptual Art

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# Skies of Generations Past

Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Extinction

Ryan Crawford<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In response to the catastrophes of the twentieth century, contemporary writers were often led to revolutionize inherited forms of philosophical presentation. And now, in an age of Anthropocene extinction, such experiments have become necessary once again. To comprehend this most recent of disasters, the present essay develops a practice of the philosophical fragment which, by returning to contemporaneous accounts of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl, seeks to demonstrate what was both anticipated by and wholly unforeseen from within the perspective of earlier attempts at contending with natural and societal disasters. By tracking the changing status of the skies in such writers as Robert Antelme, Marguerite Duras, Günther Anders, Svetlana Alexievich, and Greta Thunberg, the present essay distinguishes this longer twentieth-century history of destruction from the work of extermination now underway.

## Keywords

Anthropocene, Philosophical Fragment, Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Chernobyl

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FIGURE 1. Iya Demianiuk, *Untitled*, 2023. Watercolor and acrylic on canvas, 80 × 60 cm. Photograph by Demianiuk. Courtesy of the artist.

• • •

For a pain that has come to seem permanent, it is often to the stars one turns after every other appeal has gone unanswered. A few minutes' time, however, is typically enough to demonstrate that here too there will be no relief—the heavens have no answer and the skies care nothing for a suffering that is not their own.

• • •

For the moment, however, such an end is not yet certain. For it is on Christmas Eve 1944 that a prisoner of Gandersheim concentration camp, Robert Antelme, can still look up to the sky and entertain the same hope that stirred the star-gazing appeals of so many before.

On that day, Antelme is imprisoned with some five hundred others at Kloster Brunshausen, a former monastery on whose grounds stand SS barracks, SS prisoners, and an armaments factory. Not long before, Antelme had been an inmate at Buchenwald; not long afterwards, Antelme and others will be sent on a death march to Dachau from which only 120 will survive. At the moment, however, it is still Christmas Eve 1944, and on this most festive day every prisoner hopes the day's meal will include something more than the usual slop and soup—a holiday apple, it was rumored, allocated in earnest and offered up to all.

Awaiting his rations, Antelme realizes that it is on this day and no other that SS and inmates alike will train their thoughts on a single event, a shared object of celebration otherwise absent the world of the camps. And so he wonders, seduced by such an unexpected alignment of fates: "Maybe there'll be a truce for the ovens at Auschwitz tonight?" And continues:

Will this special night of the year be the night of their conscience? . . . Tonight, are the kapos who staff the ovens going to get drunk, will everybody, everywhere, sing tonight, even at Auschwitz? A loaf apiece, universal reconciliation, unity of the human race attained: tonight everyone is going to laugh, or cry, over the "same" thing! (Antelme 1998, 104)

A moment later, the daydream disappears. "Shameful expectation," he concludes, correcting himself: "Shit, true shit; true latrines; true ovens; true ashes; our true life here" (*ibid.*). The apple desired was of course not forthcoming and the ovens of Auschwitz kept burning.

Later that day, once the meal had been eaten, hands warmed, stories told of lives that were no longer theirs, and the men filed off to sleep, Antelme resisted the prevailing torpor and walked outside to take a piss.

“The night was dark and full of stars,” he recounts, and in the boundlessness of that hallowed and “overspreading night,” its canopy seemed strangely capable of “invest[ing] everything with the same value” (110). For a moment, it seemed as though the inequality characteristic of the camps might itself disappear if one could only believe that this night was the same night for everyone: “for Fritz and for the Rhineland, for the woman who’d given me orders and the one who’d given me bread” (*ibid.*). The differences of the day, made and unmade by men like oneself, would then seem like nothing compared to that more essential humanity made possible by the equality of the night.

But such a promise could not be kept, Antelme knew—that night, like every other, is utterly indifferent to the plight of those suffering and defenseless under its protection. “You can burn children without distracting the night,” Antelme remarks, for no matter the pain,

[t]he night is unmoveable around us . . . Above us, the stars too are calm . . . [and] this calm, this immobility are neither the essence nor the symbol of a preferable truth; they are the scandal of nature’s ultimate indifference. (111)

A star-filled, entirely uncaring night to demonstrate how what once served as a compass for the directionless, and a guide for those distrustful of every other power, would never again be sought out for advice or orientation—proof, if any were still needed, that neither example nor intervention could be expected from a nature that had since fallen silent. *You can burn children without distracting the night*, Antelme writes, for there is nothing the skies will not allow. And so the disaster continues once this last hope and refuge for the forsaken is replaced by a nature unmeaning, unconcerned, and ultimately implacable in its indifference to any and all remaining human demands.

• • •

A short time later, a vast distance apart, disaster comes not from the sky’s withdrawal but from some 31,000 feet above the ground.

In the early morning hours of August 6, 1945, an American bomber takes off from the small South Pacific island of Tinian en route to Hiroshima.<sup>2</sup> Assigned the task of so-called “weather reconnaissance,” *Straight Flush* is spotted above Hiroshima at 7:09 a.m. Shortly thereafter, an air raid warning rings out over the city. But since such warnings are by now a daily occurrence, since Hiroshima has long been spared the fate of American bombardment, those who look up and see only a single weather plane are

reassured and continue on with their day (Hersey 1946, 26). Less than an hour later, the “all clear” sounds throughout the city of a quarter million people—another false alarm.

From the skies above things look different. *Straight Flush*'s pilot, Claude R. Eatherly, later recalled: “As to the weather that day . . . there were scattered cumulus clouds . . . at an altitude of 12,000 to 15,000 feet. . . . The weather seemed ideal” (Anders and Eatherly 1989, 80). A quarter of an hour after settling over the city, *Straight Flush* gives the go ahead and departs soon after.

At 8:12 a.m., the bomb run begins. Over the city, another three planes are spotted: *Enola Gay* carries the bomb, *The Great Artiste* the measuring equipment, *Necessary Evil* is there to take photographs. Three minutes later, *Enola Gay*'s bombardier opens the hatch doors, yells “Bombs away,” and lets fall a warhead on which are written the words: “For the boys of Indianapolis.” The local time is 08:15:17 hours. The bomb is called Little Boy.

The bomb descends six miles in forty-three seconds. At 1,968 feet, it explodes; nuclear fission begins 0.15 microseconds later. The sky is now several million degrees Fahrenheit hotter than the surface of the sun. A tenth of a second later, the fireball expands to a hundred feet in diameter and, as radiation reaches the ground, the air begins to glow. Bodies are vaporized, tiles fuse together, bronze and granite melt, the internal organs of humans and other animals evaporate.

At two-tenths of a second after detonation, the blast wave moves outward at 7,200 miles an hour. At one second, the fireball expands to nine hundred feet and a mushroom cloud that will eventually reach a height double that of the Empire State Building begins to form. The ground temperature is now seven thousand degrees Fahrenheit. Where people and objects once stood, nuclear shadows appear, outlines all that's left.

One hundred and fifty thousand people are killed, eighty thousand within a minute of the blast. In the immediate aftermath, the survivors cannot understand what could have caused such destruction. Their explanations settled on causes with which they were already familiar: “gasoline sprinkled from an aeroplane, maybe, or some combustible gas, or a big cluster of incendiaries, or the work of parachutists” (Hersey 1946, 70). An imagination made in times of measurements now obsolete could not fathom the fact that one age had come to an end and another had just as quickly begun, “a new era in man's understanding of nature's forces,” as US President Harry S. Truman would declare later that day (Truman 1945). Prior forms of air warfare were weak, all too human affairs; in an age of nu-

clear war, the very “force from which the sun draws its power,” as Truman described it, could now be loosed upon the enemy (*ibid.*). As a result, the Japanese would have to either surrender or expect “a rain of ruin from the air the likes of which has never been seen on this earth” (*ibid.*). Three days later, the city of Nagasaki became that ruin.

• • •

“When I was about eight years old, I first heard about something called climate change, or global warming,” recalls Greta Thunberg (2019a, 6). “I remember thinking that it was very strange that humans, who are an animal species among others, could be capable of changing the earth’s climate.” Strange indeed, though such changes are by now incontestable and almost too well known to warrant repeating: global temperatures increasing everywhere, ice caps melting, seas rising, plants and animals well known and never before seen going extinct, arable land turning to dust and the oceans rapidly becoming too acidic to support life. Though none of this is at all new, knowing it has never made very much difference. “The more knowledge there is of the consequences” of what it is that has produced this warming world, writes Andreas Malm (2016, 3), “the more fossil fuels are burnt.” Thirty years after governments first pledged to limit greenhouse gasses, emissions have increased some sixty-three percent and the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere has now reached levels unseen for the last three million years.<sup>2</sup>

Aware of all this, the eight-year-old asked herself: “If burning fossil fuels was so bad that it threatened our very existence, how could we just continue like before? Why were there no restrictions? Why wasn’t it made illegal?” (Thunberg 2019a, 7). “To me, that did not add up,” Thunberg continues, “It was too unreal” (*ibid.*). Such a situation, all too normal for others, was for Thunberg incomprehensible. Soon she became depressed, stopped eating and for a year fell silent. “I just thought that everything is just so wrong,” she recalls, “and that everything is so strange and everything is so sad, and why isn’t anyone doing anything about this?” (Thunberg 2019b). Eventually Thunberg ended her silence and, on August 20, 2018, sat down on the steps of the Swedish parliament, refusing to attend a school whose promise of knowledge’s benefits had long since been invalidated. With a sign reading “Skolstrejk för Klimatet” (School Strike for

2 According to the Global Carbon Project, global emissions in 1990 stood at 22,182 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>; in 2017, at 36,153 metric tons. See <http://www.globalcarbonatlas.org/en/CO2-emissions>.



FIGURE 2. Alexi Kukuljevic, *an albatross gull gut*, 2018–20. Back view. Canvas, spray paint, acrylic, birdseed, plumb-bob, spray foam, glass, and silicone; 80 × 38 cm. Photograph by Kukuljevic. Courtesy of the artist.

Climate), Thunberg handed out flyers to those passing by: “We children don’t usually do what you adults tell us to do,” it read; “We do as you do. And since you don’t give a damn about my future, then I won’t, either” (*ibid.*). Since then, millions of schoolchildren have similarly denounced the catastrophe engineered by previous generations. To the excuse that cutting emissions requires the kind of strategies and negotiations that have long delayed the implementation of any adequate policy, Thunberg (2019a, 8) replies with the kind of black-and-white clarity of which she is today the expression: “There are no grey areas when it comes to survival,” she writes, “Either we go on as a civilization or we don’t.” And while reactions to Thunberg have frequently sought to explain away such ultimatums by referring to the inanities of individual and group psychology, the substance of Thunberg’s claims are based on a science united in its recognition that the earth of old is now gone, that this 4.5-billion-year-old planet has entered a time unprecedented, “a *no-analogue state*” as they say (Crutzen and Steffen 2003, 253; emphasis in original), in which that humankind whose effects on the Earth system are everywhere evident is expected to “remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come” (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 18)—long past the time, in other words, when the very species which inaugurated this new epoch in earth history may have long since gone extinct.

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The progress of disasters often recasts the disasters of old in rather less sinister lights. To have once felt forsaken by the skies, for instance, seems today an idea too trivial to be taken altogether seriously; so too those later, more recent fears of what might one day be loosed from somewhere beyond the cloudline.

For now that this most contemporary of disasters has so exceeded the horrors of all previous history, every older alarm appears positively antiquated by comparison, stuck somewhere on the other side of a caesura separating the past from a present that exists in an age apart from what was earlier too episodic to achieve the permanence made possible by our own more recent entrance into the planet’s sixth mass extinction.

It must be admitted, of course, that it was through similar claims to the unprecedented that Auschwitz was earlier made into the signature of an evil incomparable, “Hiroshima” a word for terrors surpassing those of any previous slaughter—knowing all this, however, does not make the present’s claim to the unprecedented any easier to understand. For once its destructive capacities are known to have so superseded those of the past

that earlier disasters begin to seem almost innocent by comparison, the only way to approximate the disaster underway would be to find a form of expression capable of incorporating within itself all that has been dug, blasted, and burned to make the present's centuries-long preparation possible. A writing that cannot bear this weight fails the material out of which it is made.

• • •

It is April 1945 and Marguerite Duras is awaiting news of her husband, Robert Antelme. "I must be sensible: I'm waiting for Robert . . . expecting him, and he's coming back" (Duras 1986, 5).

As Allied troops advance into German territory, the names of those found in the concentration camps are published in the newspapers. For Duras, each new day is the same as the day before: she checks the lists, waits by the phone and expects someone to knock at the door, notifying her of Antelme's death. "His death is in me, beating in my head," she writes, and because it won't stop, she has to leave the apartment, run outside, avoid newsstand, transit center and every other sign of a hope daily disappointed (6). "Outside it's April," she notes, and knowing that the Allies may come too late for Antelme, suddenly she sees him: "In a ditch, face down, legs drawn up, arms outstretched, he's dying. Dead" (7). "I know all one can know when one knows nothing," she writes, and hurries home. It's now getting late and she has to wait by the phone. It's evening in Paris and "[o]ver there it's evening too," she writes of wherever it is Antelme might be: "a red evening. The end of the world" (8).

A month later, Duras receives a call: Antelme is in Dachau, alive, but so weak he is said to have only hours to live. She should send people out to get him, to rescue him from the liberated camp now quarantined. "Expect the worst," she is told as soon as the car carries him over the French border, "You won't recognize him" (52). The next day he returns. Supported by friends, he enters the house, stops on the first-floor landing, looks up, recognizes Duras and smiles. "I shrieked no, that I didn't want to see," Duras recalls, "I started to run again, up the stairs this time. I was shrieking . . . the war emerged in my shrieks. . . . I found myself in some neighbors' apartment. They forced me to drink some rum, they poured it into my mouth. Into the shrieks" (53–54).

Regaining consciousness, she sees Antelme, right there in front of her, huge, smiling and apologizing for sitting as he is, "reduced to such a wreck" (54).

For three weeks, the doctor comes several times a day. In the beginning, Antelme could not be given food; other returning deportees, fed too soon, died from the shock of nourishment. Antelme talks incessantly, he has a fever, eventually begins to eat and asks to use the toilet. His shit, however, is almost indescribable, “inhuman,” Duras remarks: “It separated him from us more than the fever, the thinness, the nailless fingers, the marks of SS blows” (58) . “We gave him gruel that was golden yellow ... and it came out of him dark green like slime from a swamp,” she continues.

When it emerged the room filled with a smell, not of putrefaction or corpses . . . but rather of humus, of dead leaves, of dense undergrowth. It was a somber smell, dark reflection of the dark night from which he was emerging and which we would never know. (58)

Duras’s diary of those days was published in 1985, long after she had forgotten having written it. And despite the fact that she was then the author of some twenty books and the winner of France’s most prestigious literary prize, it was that diary which had become for her indispensable, “one of the most important things in my life.” And yet, she admits, “It can’t really be called ‘writing’”; for whenever that diary is compared to anything else she had written, “literature,” she confessed, becomes “something of which I felt ashamed” (4).

• • •

It is April 4, 1945. The death march has begun. Fleeing the advance of Allied troops, their planes now rattling overhead, four hundred and fifty prisoners set out from Gandersheim concentration camp, moving deeper and deeper into German territory, putting more and more distance between themselves and the cannons forty kilometers away. The prisoners’ ranks had been thinned that morning. The SS promised those too sick to walk they would be cared for in the local hospital, then took them out into the woods and murdered them. And while the liberators’ cannons could now be heard everywhere, the victory they announced provided little relief. The prisoners who had earlier marched off into the woods heard those cannons too, Antelme (1998, 211) remarks: “they died listening to it.”

Soon the barbed-wire gate is crossed. At the road they turn left, away from the front; monastery and factory are now behind them, a small river is ahead, a plain, then dark hills in the distance. The column passes villages where only women remain. The Germans will lose, Antelme knows, but that doesn’t mean the prisoners are any less likely to be killed at



FIGURE 3. Alexi Kukuljevic, *an albatross gull gut*, 2018–20. Front view. Photograph by Kukuljevic. Courtesy of the artist.

any moment. One could, of course, tell the SS to simply give up, that the war is already lost, that they might as well let the prisoners go; but the SS wouldn't believe it. Instead, all march on, SS and prisoner alike, each part of the same column, all aware that the planes will not distinguish between captor and prisoner, killing indiscriminately. Despite this, there is nothing they hold in common, Antelme writes: "We couldn't see the same sun" (1998, 215).

At night, not a sound is heard and everything proceeds as it had from time immemorial: trees breathe, insects feed, leaves perspire, the air is filled with moisture, dew covers the fields. Nature appears wholesome and good, a tree omnipotent because it will "surely still be alive tomorrow"—unlike them (218). Whenever the prisoners see something natural, it appears to them something alien—as though nothing natural could ever rot or die like them, as though nothing natural could get sick and be forgotten like them. "We have banished death from natural beings," Antelme explains, because the kind of death and decay each prisoner experiences inside himself seems so utterly incompatible with that endured by other natural beings (*ibid.*). "We feel as though all possible rottenness has been sucked up into ourselves," Antelme continues:

To us who look so like animals any animal has taken on qualities of magnificence; to us who are so similar to any rotting plant, that plant's destiny seems as luxurious as a destiny that concludes with dying in bed. We have come to resemble whatever fights simply to eat, and dies from not eating; come to where we exist on the level of some other species, which will never be ours and towards which we are tending. (218–19)

Yet such men will not become animals, Antelme concludes, no matter how much the SS demand it. In spite of the camps' every attempt at making men into matter fit for the production of death, the extraction of profits, and nothing more, the matter of man is not as infinitely fungible as that. "We are unable to become either animals or trees," Antelme writes, "We are not able to, and the SS cannot make us succeed in it." No matter the degradation, he continues, "[t]he distance separating us from another species [remains] intact" (219). Every single person in the camp, from those most debased and wretched to those most privileged and powerful, all belong to the same species, Antelme observes, an insight allowing the prisoners to steal from the SS his "supernatural" status and see him, instead, within the wider context of that nature not even he could bend to his will. "He can kill a man," Antelme writes of the SS officer, "but he can't change him into something else" (220)—and with that recognition the SS

become men like any other, men, that is, who can also be killed like any other. The bombs falling from the sky do not and will not discriminate.

Their flight from Gandersheim continues for another twenty-four days, on foot, trains, tractors, and boats, through Halle, Bittersfeld, Dresden, and Prague, before finally arriving at Dachau. Throughout the march, the SS retain their cheeks and their fat, keep their rifles and their insignia; the prisoners are starved, beaten, and eaten by lice. Those who reach Dachau see American planes circling low overhead. “Every head is raised towards the sky,” Antelme writes, the Allied troops’ machine guns signaling that the war’s end is near: “The whole sky is singing,” Antelme rejoices (286).

Soon the Nazis scatter, the watchtowers of Dachau empty, a white flag is raised above the camp, and American soldiers arrive. The prisoners try speaking with them but see how quickly the Americans stop listening; it is then that the prisoners realize how they are now “prey to a kind of infinite, untransmittable knowledge” of which others will want only the smallest piece, a single example, a stirring idea. To know something of what it is to see the human race in its truth would require enduring the kind of tedium induced by listening to each and every prisoner, to hearing all that has happened to thousands. But because “no listener has that vice,” the prisoners let their liberators think it is enough to say that it’s all very frightful and leave it at that (289). Words like *unbelievable* and *unimaginable* allow a conscience that would otherwise fall apart to hold itself together. Their story will not be told.

It is now August 1945. Antelme is in the care of Duras and Dionys Mascalo, his best friend. Because he is feeling better, the three take a road trip, and see “by the side of the road one morning that huge headline,” Duras remembers, and on it only a single word: “Hiroshima.” It is, she writes, “perhaps the first thing outside [Antelme’s] own life that he sees or reads about” (Duras 1986, 64).

• • •

Among the bomber pilots responsible for Hiroshima’s destruction, it was only *Straight Flush’s* Claude R. Eatherly who acknowledged any guilt for actions for which they were all celebrated. In response, Eatherly, now classed among the heroes, turned himself into a criminal instead, robbing banks and forging checks in the hope of compelling his countrymen to arrive at that judgment his prior crimes seemed not to warrant. Such attempts were of course unsuccessful. Rather than stand trial for crimes against humanity, Eatherly was declared insane, institutionalized and



FIGURE 4. Seth Weiner, *A painting of legs in the sand by pierre bonnard made from sand (7).png*, 2022. Sandy Leg Generations Series. Digital image, 1792 × 2560 pixels. Courtesy of the artist.

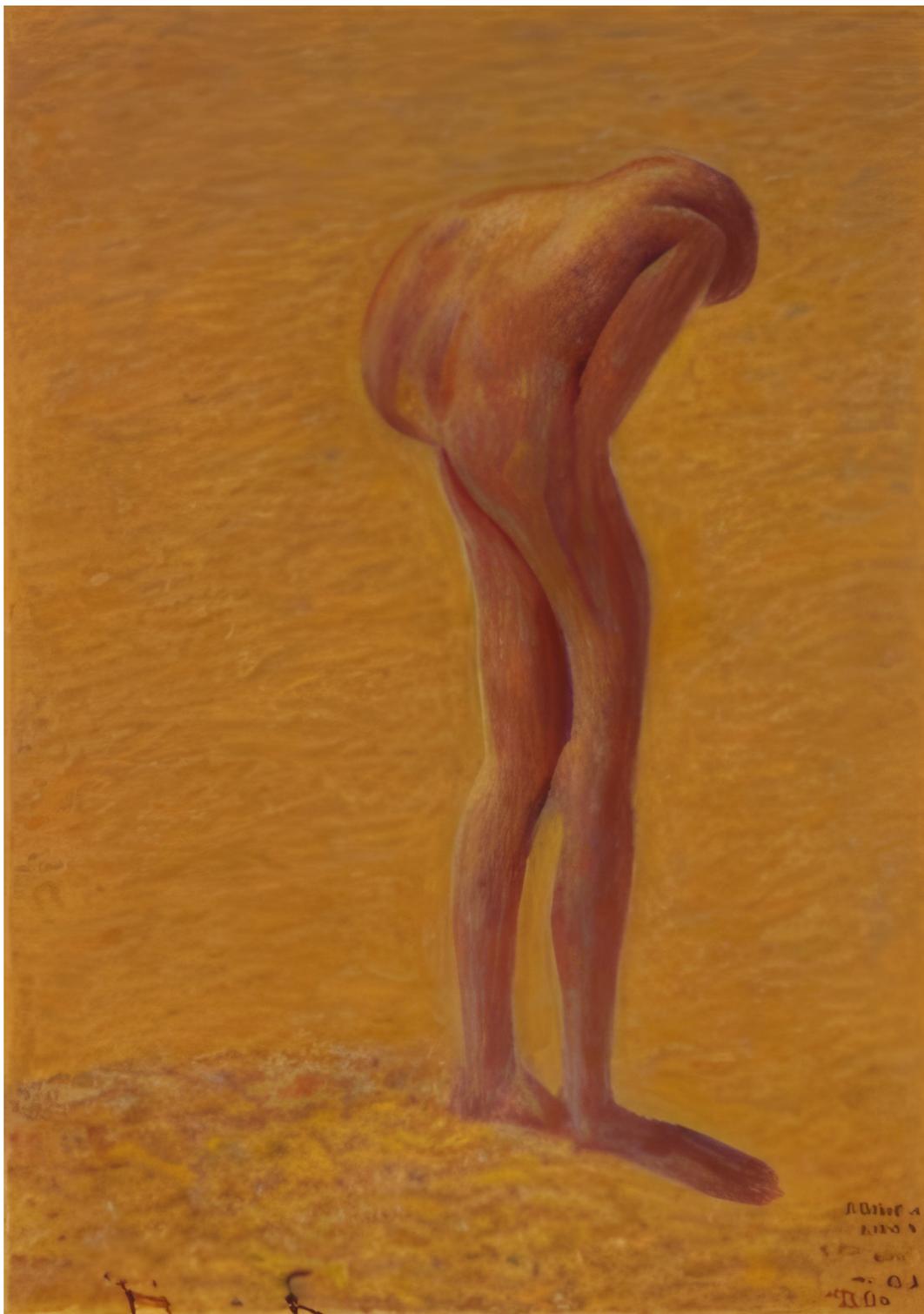


FIGURE 5. Seth Weiner, *A painting of legs in the sand by pierre bonnard made from sand (8).png*, 2022. Sandy Leg Generations Series. Digital image, 1792 × 2560 pixels. Courtesy of the artist.

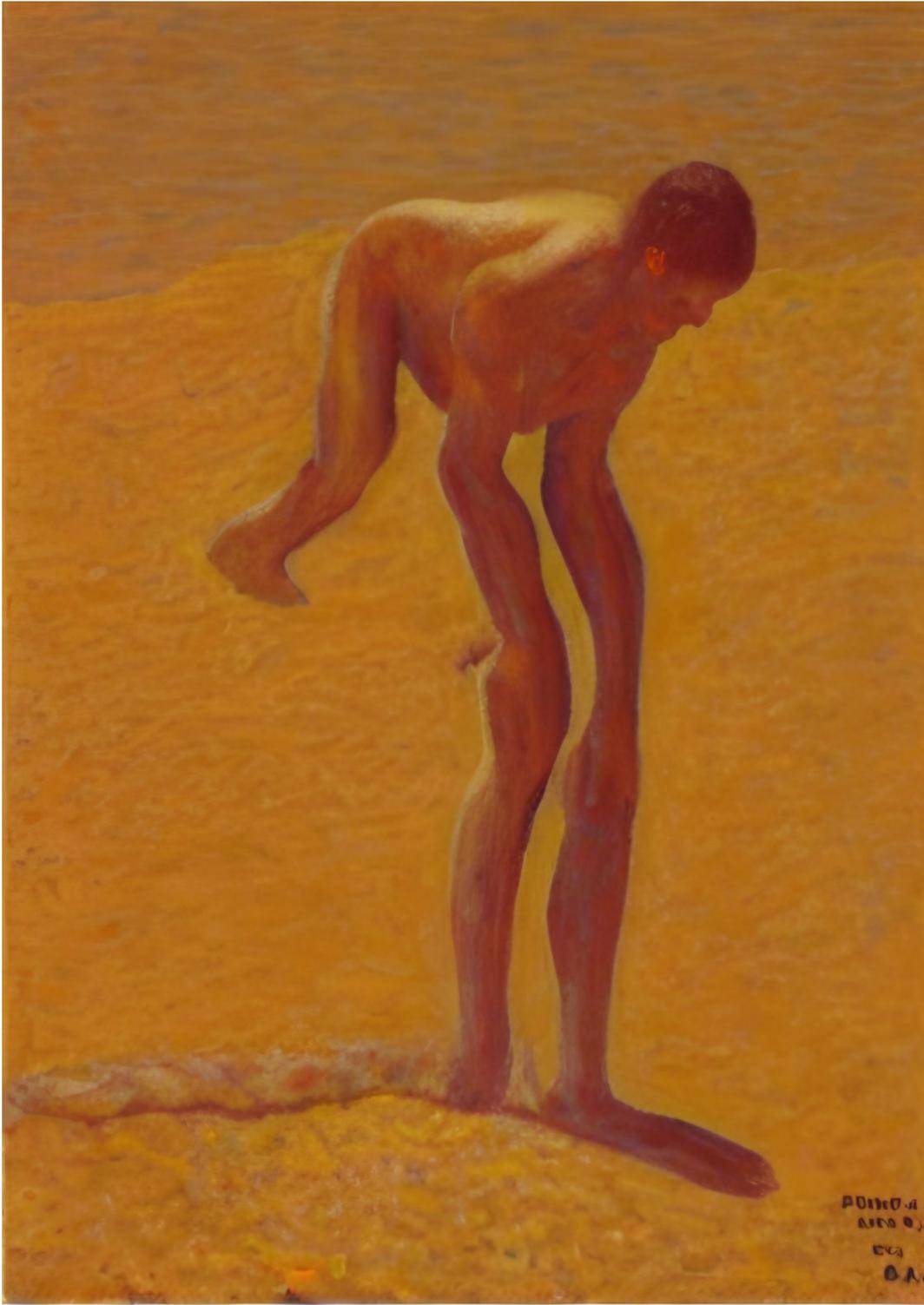


FIGURE 6. Seth Weiner, *A painting of legs in the sand by pierre bonnard made from sand (9).png*, 2022. Sandy Leg Generations Series. Digital image, 1792 × 2560 pixels. Courtesy of the artist.

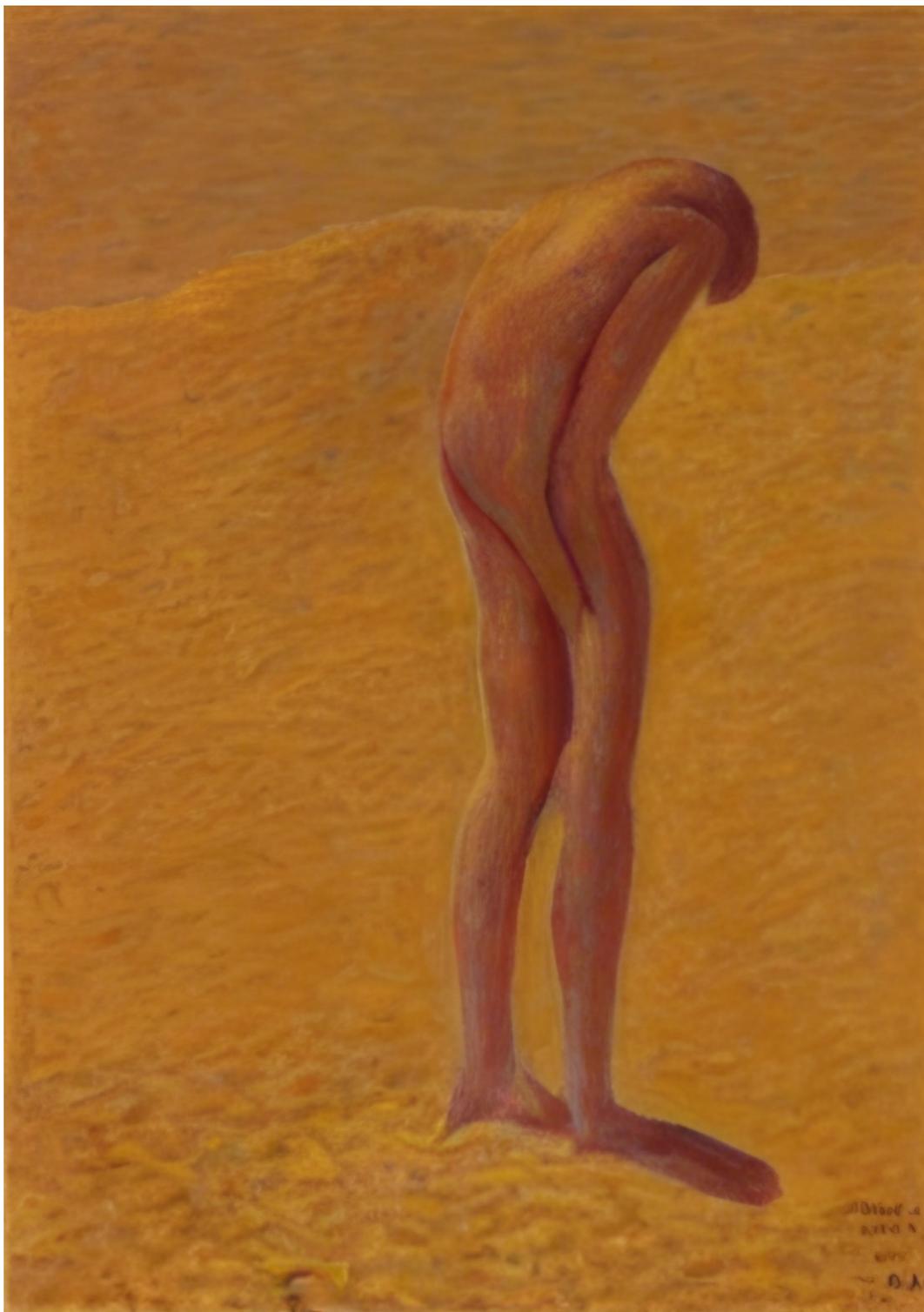


FIGURE 7. Seth Weiner, *A painting of legs in the sand by pierre bonnard made from sand (9).png*, 2022. Sandy Leg Generations Series. Digital image, 1792 × 2560 pixels. Courtesy of the artist.

deemed no longer responsible for his actions. Such a response was of course little different from that which earlier acquitted him of far greater crimes—crimes for which he would never be charged because to do so would have required a whole nation’s admission that the bombing of Hiroshima was a crime in the first place. “The truth is that society simply *cannot* accept the fact of my guilt,” Eatherly would later write, “without at the same time recognizing its own far deeper guilt” (Anders and Eatherly 1989, 36). Reclamation, for Eatherly, had as its condition a notion of responsibility that did not then and does not now exist.

At the time, such problems still seemed unprecedented. With what kind of imagination, one might have asked, could anyone fathom a form of destruction beyond the bounds of all prior experience, exceeding every last lesson of humans’ inherited and learned capabilities? “For me it was just a bigger bomb,” explained the radar man of *Enola Gay* (*ibid.*, 4), and there testified to a form of integral irresponsibility inaugurated by the nuclear age. “Because mass murder lies infinitely far outside the sphere of those actions which we can visualize and towards which we can take an emotional position,” writes Günther Anders, the faculties governing the exercise of human reason, imagination, action and feeling must be regarded as woefully insufficient. “At best we can repent the murder of *one* man,” Anders writes, “more our feeling does not perform.” “We may be able to imagine *ten*,” he continues, “more our imagination cannot perform.” “But to destroy a hundred thousand,” he concludes, “causes no difficulty whatsoever” (*ibid.*, 12). The fundamental discrepancy between the effect of even the most incidental action and humanity’s inability to integrate such knowledge facilitates the repetition of events for which neither imagination nor feeling are in any way prepared.

The problem was that Eatherly did feel it, and knew that no mention of what others call the *unimaginable* nature of the disaster could absolve him of the guilt earned. In this respect, he was indeed unique, exceptional even—if only for a moment. For what Eatherly also realized was that what he had done everyone would one day be capable of doing; that the part he played in an evil for which he was indeed responsible would soon become the province of all. For Anders, Eatherly thus became the “predecessor” (*ibid.*, 1) of an age in which all became, like him, “guiltlessly guilty” (52), perpetrators of a by now generalized destruction for which the unsuitability of earlier notions of responsibility makes no one any less responsible.

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After the industrial revolution of the last several centuries, a new epoch emerged, an epoch characterized, in the words of Paul Virilio (2005, 139), by “the sudden industrialization of the end.”

This is of course not the usual story of the modern world told today. All are told, instead, that every new technology is in itself neutral, as amenable to misuse as it is to being put to good use; indeed, the problem is said to consist, not in the technology, but in those who use it. For Virilio, however, this focus on those who use the technology ignores the enormity of destruction inherent within technological innovations themselves. In a 2005 conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, Virilio recalled having been asked about one such innovation: “Airbus is getting an eight hundred or one thousand seat airplane ready,” Virilio remembers having been told,

and someone asked my opinion . . . I said, “Eight hundred deaths.” They replied, “Stop! You always look at the bad side.” I said, “Are you kidding me? . . . Take a thousand-seat airline, that makes one thousand dead. You accept it, the proof being that you find I am exaggerating when I say one thousand deaths. (107–08)

“Each invention creates the possibility of a *specific failure*” (103; emphasis added), Virilio insists, a failure whose future is as integral to the operation of airplanes and nuclear reactors as it was for that once peerless pair of twelve-thousand-foot towers, a World Trade Center filled with some twenty thousand people apiece, built without a cement core and fated to fall. What’s novel about such inventions is not only what makes them work; equally unprecedented are the forms of destruction each harbors within itself and will one day realize. For those who contribute to the development of these technologies, such a revolution in destruction will naturally go unfelt, masked as it is by feigned ignorance about the disaster for which all will one day feel themselves innocent. Here, as ever, the hand removed from the immediacy of effects can be counted upon to have kept its conscience clean.

From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to the Anthropocene: a hundred years of “blameless” disasters whose progress in ever more unimaginable forms of destruction has made the tyrants of old appear more innocent with every passing day. From the perspective of those writing at the onset of the nuclear age, earlier revolutions in annihilation had already come to seem almost ineffectual by comparison. “Seen in retrospect,” Elias Canetti writes, even those once unparalleled horrors of National Socialism now appear “innocent and almost comfortable” when measured against the terrors of the present. Writing in 1960, at a time, in other words, when that acceleration of destruction made possible by the bomb meant that

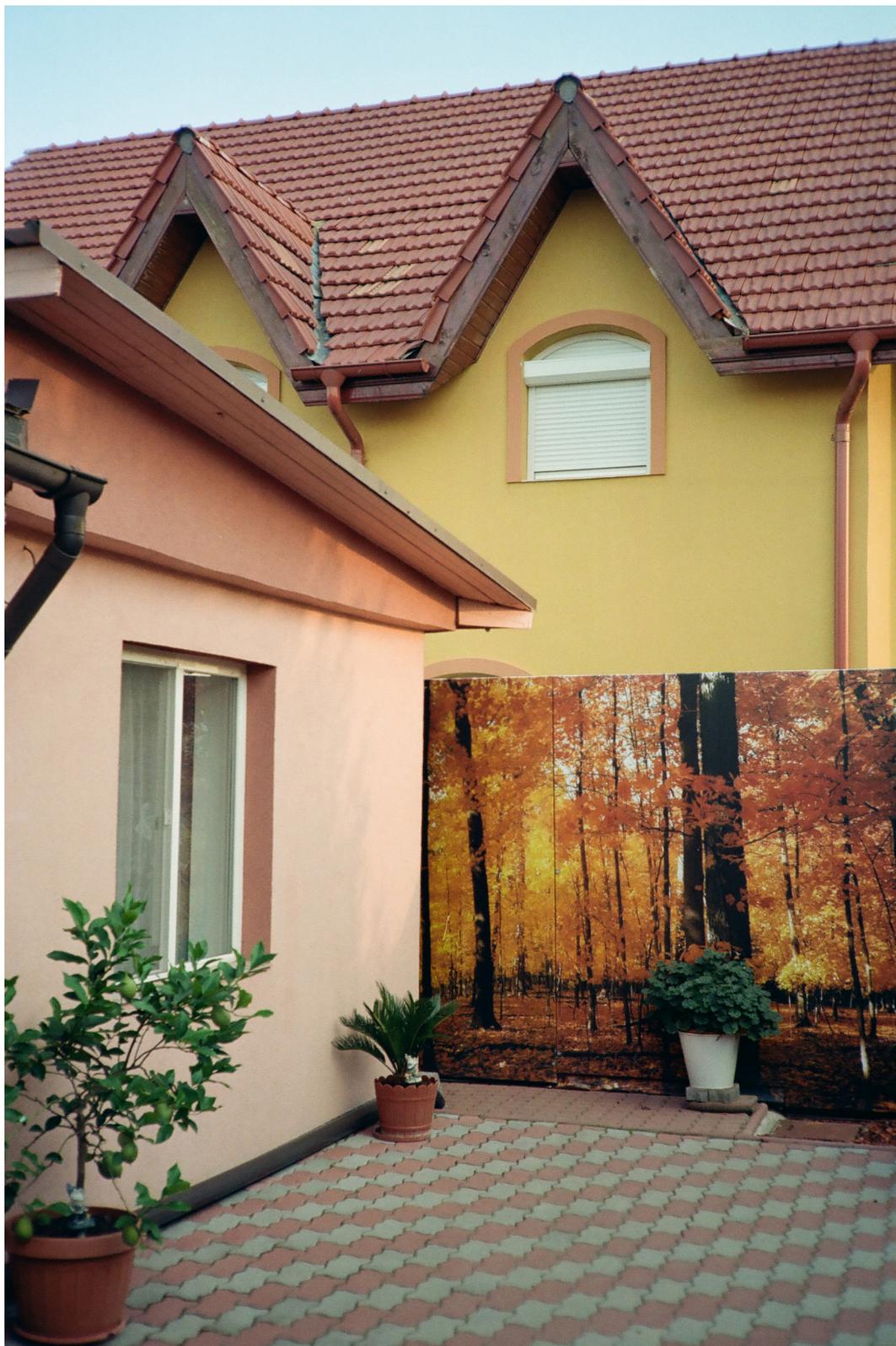


FIGURE 8. Alexandra Wanderer, *Untitled*, 2018. Analog C-print, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

there was “only a moment between decision and effect,” when hundreds, thousands, and hundreds of thousands had all contributed to the development of a terror whose effects few intended and still fewer would ever endure—in such a situation, even the worst terrors Canetti himself escaped had come to seem innocuous beside those more recently made possible. “Measured by the [potentialities of the nuclear age],” Canetti (1984, 468) writes, “Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and Hitler seem [to us] pitiful amateurs.” In the face of the total destruction promised by nuclear peril, National Socialism’s engineered annihilation of millions becomes the memory of a fear long since eclipsed: “If a man can exterminate millions of his fellow men in a fraction of a second,” Anders writes, “[then] a couple of thousand SS soldiers who could only murder millions *peu à peu* are harmless by comparison. . . . Compared to modern means of mass murder, what happened at the extermination camps in the three years prior to Hiroshima was”—and here Anders pauses, acknowledging that he “can hardly write the [following] word,” before adding: those camps were, by comparison, ultimately “harmless” (quoted in Liessmann 2011, 128).

And this despite the fact that nothing within either the matter or the motivation of humankind had fundamentally changed over the course of the last hundred years. What changed was a technology whose scale was no longer local but global, whose object was no longer the individual but the species, and whose threat could no longer be feared because it not only exceeded every previous human measure but was scarcely even accessible to the senses.

Such a change was first recognized in the wake of a disaster that “surpassed the camps of Auschwitz and Kolyma,” in the words of Svetlana Alexievich, its name coming from a star said to have fallen to the earth at the time of the apocalypse detailed in the Book of Revelations: “wormwood,” one says in English, “Chernobyl” in Russian. For it was there that radioactivity’s fallout first impressed upon the mind the fact that no individual life, indeed, not even the life of the species, was capable of approximating the long life of contaminants unseen by the eye but which would still survive hundreds of thousands of years into the future (Alexievich 31). As a result, “[w]e now find ourselves on a new page of history”: the age of war-like cataclysms has come to an end and “the history of disasters has begun” (27).

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“There is a need to draw a line between the leaders responsible and the people like me forced to serve as mere instruments in the hands of the

leaders,” wrote SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann, appealing for clemency after his death sentence had been pronounced. “I was not a responsible leader,” Eichmann explained, reasoning that since he neither intended nor carried out the murders he organized but never authorized, he was not at all criminally responsible. “And as such,” he concluded, I “do not feel myself guilty” (Kershner 2016). Because the long arc of an act extends beyond the limits of any single individual, whatever results from that act can always be excused if it can be shown to have exceeded an individual’s exclusive control.

For the American bomber Claude R. Eatherly, such rationalizations were of little utility once he realized how older conceptions of guilt and responsibility had now been overtaken by reality. For while there may have once been a time when people had little reason to ask after what it was they did every day, when many could go about their lives “without posing to themselves questions about the way they are accustomed to think and act,” those days, Eatherly observes, had long since passed (Anders and Eatherly 1989, 6). Once the enormity of the disaster for which everyone is at least indirectly responsible has transformed even the most minor act of obedience into the sign of some measure of guilt for that which all know will one day follow, then men like Eichmann and Eatherly begin to seem like the harbingers of a time only recently realized—“two examples of our age” as Anders claims (*ibid.*, 126). For while everyone today proceeds in half-knowledge of the catastrophic consequences of their individual actions, and can only assuage their conscience by invoking Eichmann’s arguments about being no more than a cog in the machine, one among many, compelled to carry out orders one has not oneself authorized, Eatherly did the opposite and assumed responsibility where it was not required, indeed, where it was in fact rejected by society. In so doing, he became what Anders called Eichmann’s “antipode” (108). For what Eatherly understood was that the disaster he unleashed had not come to an end, that the pursuit of ever more experiments with ever more destructive thermonuclear weapons was the aim of the very society, state, and history of which he knew himself a part. “There are those . . . who think that the result” will one day bring about “the extinction of the world,” Eatherly writes. That this state of affairs has continued, that what’s today called business as usual has never stopped, has had the effect of ensuring the end of what Eatherly once called, perhaps a bit presumptuously, “this people’s earth” (84–85).

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At the moment of the atomic blast over Hiroshima, Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk at the East Asia Tin Works, sat down to her desk before turning to speak to a friend nearby. A blinding light then filled the room and Sasaki lost consciousness. The ceiling collapsed, bookcases fell, and, as John Hersey (1946, 31) reports, in this “the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books.”

The date is September 9, 1945. After weeks of recovery, Sasaki was eventually transported back to Hiroshima and cared for in the city’s Red Cross Hospital. Upon her return, Sasaki saw for the first time the ruins she had been rushed from weeks before. And what she saw left her both horrified and amazed: “Over everything,” she said,

was a blanket of fresh, vivid, lush optimistic green: the verdancy rose even from the foundations of ruined houses. Weeds already hid the ashes, and wild flowers were in bloom among the city’s bones. The bomb had not only left the underground organs of plants intact; it had stimulated them. . . . It actually seemed as if a load of sickle-senna seed had been dropped along with the bomb. (93–94)

Five months later, Sasaki became despondent and soon seemed entirely uninterested in living any longer. A German priest, Father Kleinsorge, was brought in to raise her spirits. Sasaki challenged him: “If your God is so good and kind,” she said, pointing to her wounded leg and the patients surrounding her, “how can he let people suffer like this?” The priest defended the powers Sasaki questioned, the same forces the Americans had definitively disempowered, admitting that “[m]an is not now in the condition God intended.” Indeed, the priest continued, “[h]e has fallen from grace through sin” (110). Sasaki drew strength from the priest’s words; not long afterwards, she is said to have converted to Catholicism.

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In the forty years, eight months, nineteen days, twenty-two hours, and eight minutes between the destruction of Hiroshima and the meltdown of Chernobyl’s Nuclear Reactor #4 on April 26, 1986, hundreds of so-called nuclear tests were carried out, dozens of nuclear power stations built. At the time, a strict distinction was made between nuclear energy developed for the purposes of war and nuclear energy for nonmilitary purposes. “Atoms for Peace,” one said at the time.

Those close by the accident rushed to their balconies to watch the fire. “To this day, I can see the bright, raspberry red glow,” recounts Nadezhda Petrovna Vyhovskaya, “It was an incredible colour. Not an ordinary fire, but a kind of shining,” she says, unlike anything one might see in the



FIGURE 9. Käthe Hager von Strobele, *Gelplants, Nr. 3*, 2023. Lambda C-print. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

movies (Alexievich 2016, 191): “We had no idea death could look so pretty” (192). After the blast, everything was washed down, the soil turned up, lovers cautioned against getting too close to each other, communities relocated, family cottages, villages and cemeteries buried beneath the ground. Everything had been contaminated, nothing could be trusted, thousand-year-old ways of life destroyed in an instant. Even the flowers were to be avoided.

But for those who remained in the Dead Zone, knowledge of such contamination often paled before the landscape’s enduring beauty. It was all “breathtakingly beautiful,” recalled Gennady Grushevoy: “Meadows in flower, the gentle spring green of the forests . . . Everything is coming to life. Flourishing, singing” (146). But because everyone now knew nature’s bounty to be indistinguishable from the threat of death, earlier distinctions between the natural and the artificial, the beautiful and the ugly, the beneficial and the harmful, had all since come undone. “Fear could no longer be separated from beauty or beauty from fear” (146), and it was no use looking for radiation since the danger “was something you couldn’t hear or see,” Lilia Mikhailovna Kuzmenkova explains: “It had no smell, no colour . . . And it makes no difference what we think or do” (239).

It soon became impossible to distinguish air from land, people from nature, death from life. For now the ants below, the birds above, and the humans in between were all seen to suffer the same fate. “The distance between us shr[ank],” Alexievich writes, “[t]he previous chasm [wa]s gone,” and one knew that nothing would ever be the same again. “Man had been caught off guard” at Chernobyl, Alexievich notes:

he was not ready. Ill-prepared as a species, our entire mental apparatus, attuned to seeing, hearing and touching, had malfunctioned. Our eyes, ears and fingers were no longer any help, they could serve no purpose, because radiation is invisible . . . Now we could be killed by cut grass, a caught fish or game bird. By an apple. The world around us, once pliant and friendly, now instilled fear. (28)

*Draw radiation*, the children of the neighborhood were told. “I drew it raining yellow,” one child remembered, and alongside it “a red river flowing” (278).

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It is now June 2011. Georges Didi-Huberman takes a plane from Paris to Warsaw, a train to Krakow, a bus to Auschwitz, a shuttle to Birkenau. At the entrance to the extermination camp, “this capital of the evil that man can do to man,” Didi-Huberman (2017, 47) registers only the calm and qui-

et of a singularly unremarkable Sunday morning. Though this is indeed “the place of our history,” as Didi-Huberman observes, the outward signs of that history have been almost entirely effaced (66). Instead, the camp appears in all its “verdant serenity,” a “peaceful landscape” (105) within which the white of trees calls to mind musical scores (71) and pale flowers grow atop pits into which the bodies of the murdered were interred (100).

Didi-Huberman turns eye and camera towards barracks turned into souvenir shops, barbed wire, cracked floors, a window looking out onto the selections ramp, and much else. What time has destroyed, what the eye can no longer see persists, Didi-Huberman thinks, beyond appearances, in the same way that the dead are known to remain, transformed, “in the flowers of the fields . . . in the birches’ sap . . . in this tiny pond where lie the ashes of thousands dead” (105).

Toward the end of his trip, Didi-Huberman looks up to the canopy of birch trees, takes a picture and recalls how Classical Latin distinguished between two different kinds of bark: an outer layer called the *cortex* and, underneath it, the *liber*, the bark’s inner skin (120–21). This skin, *liber*, is etymologically related to words like *book*, *library*, *libretto* and *libel*; it is also the material from which books are made, and printed today as though no one knows that the future such books were once meant to serve has long since disappeared.

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Within every human skull are lodged trace elements of radiation whose signatures will remain in the rockface of the earth long after humans have gone extinct.

Contemporary efforts at dating the onset of the Anthropocene suggest that the most likely marker of the planet’s entrance into this new age is to be found within that history of nuclear weapons testing whose documented fatalities are as nothing compared to the destruction that will result from the accumulated effects of two hundred years of extracting and burning fossil fuels (Zalasiewicz et al. 2019, 284). That we all now live in the air of the past, as Andreas Malm (2018, 5) reminds us, means that the endlessly intoned hope for some as yet unwritten future rings hollow when set against the knowledge that the past’s afterlife has recently made the present too noxious to bear.

And yet so long as it’s still so easy for so many to go on breathing and buying as though nothing has changed, knowledge of the Anthropocene is unlikely to have any discernable effect. Wildfires can go on burning, the seas rising and everyone can talk as much as they like about climate refu-

gees, pretrauma, and the like—for too many, each such symptom will continue to appear the effect of causes too uncertain to be attributed to any single source. Indeed, it is precisely because the Anthropocene proceeds in the absence of any of those readily identifiable victims of old that its success seems assured. For so long as no individual or collective casualty can today assume all the suffering stored in the skies, attempts to transpose this pain onto nature will continue at the same time as everyone will be made to believe that societies utterly indifferent to the wrongs long committed need not bear the costs now coming due.

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“I do not want you to listen to me,” Greta Thunberg recently told the United States Congress’s Climate Change Task Force. After a year of unprecedented popular support and political adulation, the young climate activist had finally had enough: “Please save your praise,” she said, “We don’t want it. Don’t invite us here to just tell us how inspiring we are without actually doing anything about it” (quoted in Gambino 219). Because she could say nothing that hadn’t already been said before, Thunberg chose to forego any further testimony, instead entering into the record the latest scientific findings and leaving those assembled with a single request: “I want you to listen to the scientists,” she said, “And I want you to unite behind the science and then I want you to take real action” (quoted in Milman and Smith 2019). A reasonable request, of course, but one she must have suspected would go unrealized.

For what Thunberg must have also understood was that her audience had long known everything there was to know about the science behind global warming and had simply decided to do nothing about it. Not because they were prey to some ignorance additional knowledge might correct, but because a more fundamental failure had since become so common as to nearly pass unnoticed. “Contrary to what many people suppose, it is not scientific uncertainty that is the cause of our inaction,” writes Jean-Pierre Dupuy, “*We know, but we have not yet managed to believe what we know*” (2013, 58; emphasis added). Like the disasters of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Chernobyl before, the current catastrophe will continue to elicit none but the most insufficient of responses because its implications can hardly be believed. For who could today assent to what the science demonstrates and live as though the only way to avert extinction is to abandon the previous two hundred years of industrial society, retraining every last individual and collective aspiration to the horrors al-

ready underway? No fear is adequate, no life imaginable in the little that remains of a future which today appears to everywhere contract.

Knowledge of this now imminent species-wide extinction recalls earlier fears that seem almost inconsequential by comparison. “The extinction of thought is quite horrifying,” Theodor Haecker (1949, 1) wrote in 1939, at a time when a single death still seemed to beggar belief. Some fifty years of scientific advances later, Jean-François Lyotard voiced the fear that “[w]hile we talk, the sun is getting older.” In 4.5 billion years, he continued, it will explode, and

in what remains after the solar explosion, there won’t be humanness, there won’t be living creatures, there won’t be intelligent, sensitive, sentient earthlings to bear witness to it, since they and their earthly horizon will have been consumed.

“That, in my view, is the sole serious question to face humanity today,” he offered (Lyotard 1991, 8–10). And while the timescale Lyotard once feared cannot help but appear utterly extravagant today, there is at least one common problem of still immediate relevance. For what even the most cursory examination of the last hundred years cannot fail to notice is that, with the onset of each new disaster, the response is nearly always the same. And this despite the fact that each revolution in reality might have been expected to effect a similar transformation in those forms of thought and modes of expression seeking to approximate that reality. Instead, one speaks of the extinction underway as though it were unforeseen, unintended, or unwanted; as though all that can be seen in the skies of generations past should be forever without consequence. For what everyone now knows is that the air is itself witness to the fact that what is today called extinction is the result of a hundred-year-long passion for *extermination* for which the word extinction is but a single, and in every way insufficient, name for an end long anticipated but only now earned.

Vienna, December 2019



FIGURE 10. Alexandra Wanderer, *Pony*, 2020. Analog C-print, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

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# Recollecting the Future

## Matter, Form, and Spectral Violence in the Work of Pedro Reyes

Justin L. Harmon and Enrique Chacón<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper offers an immanent critique of three key works by Mexican sculptor and multimedia artist Pedro Reyes. *Palas por pistolas* (2008), *Imagine* (2012), and *Disarm* (2013–20) each function by transmuting guns confiscated from drug cartels into instruments for positive social change—first shovels for planting trees, and then musical instruments which are later automated and programmed to produce aleatory compositions. Following a cue from Reyes, we interpret this material and psychosocial transmutation as an alchemical process in which latent potencies for new modes of relation are agitated and brought to the surface. In line with the artist’s stated intentions, we discern a definite positive value in the integration of the weapons into a new logic. But the most significant value we identify is negative or, better, *nihilative*, enacting what Adorno describes as a “voluntary involuntary” and, in this way, challenging Reyes’s interpretive prepositioning of his own works. We explore surprising tensions that arise both within and between the works, allowed to stand on their own, when one approaches them from the vantage of a hylomorphic conception of art objects, that is, as composites of matter and form. The gun-instruments, appropriated from an economy of death, deploy as an uncanny counterpower to techno-logical reductionism precisely *because* of the disturbing ambiguity that they reveal in and between the familiar concepts of “matter,” “form,” “substratum,” and “substance.”

### Keywords

Adorno, alchemy, Aristotle, materialism, sculpture, violence

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## 1. Introduction

In August of 2021, the Mexican government filed a lawsuit against U.S. weapons manufacturers, seeking \$10 billion USD in damages related to the dramatic increase of gun violence in Mexico since 2006. In a parallel gesture from the art world, *Return to Sender* (2020) introduces the latest step in Mexican artist Pedro Reyes's sustained experiment in psychosocial alchemy, locking the violence plaguing his country into precious music boxes to be "sent"—as ironic love letters—to the guns' places of origin, ringing out in thin mechanical refrains slices of those places' most celebrated and internationally familiar works of music, or, in the case of Switzerland, Mani Matter's song "I Han Es Zündhölzli Azündt." Reyes (b. 1972), a Mexican sculptor and multimedia artist who works in Mexico City, is responding to the volatile conditions that developed in 2006 in the wake of Mexican President Felipe Calderón's initiation of the so-called "War on Drugs." The introduction of a significant military presence to the streets of Mexico initiated a protracted period of violence in which Mexicans suffered tremendously, causing damage to the country's social fabric and spurring dramatic opposition from scholars, artists, and the general public. Reyes's 2008 project *Palas por pistolas* marks his first contribution to this discourse.

Reyes has received international attention for a series of exhibitions produced between 2008 and 2020 that transform weapons confiscated from drug cartels. He frequently appeals to the concept of alchemy in public statements about these works. In a 2013 op-ed, he writes, "I think about the tradition of alchemy, where, simultaneous with the physical conversion of a substance, a psychological transformation is supposed to occur. As children use former weapons to plant trees, or musicians play instruments that are visibly composed of guns, they engage in a concrete activity that is positive" (Reyes 2013). We argue that *Palas por pistolas* (2008), *Imagine* (2012), and *Disarm* (2013–20) constitute a bold alchemical experiment in which the "invisible violence," represented by guns, is *transubstantiated* through art. If we understand the "ex-strophic" character of traditional Hellenic and Egyptian alchemy (Dufault 2015) to more precisely entail a *turning out* of what was already there in the unfathomed depths of a thing, it becomes clear that all alchemical change remains haunted by its indeterminate other, a dark surplus whose intransigent quality confuses the boundaries between presence and absence, past and future, fear and hope. Reyes's experiment is one of *social* no less than *material* alchemy, and each of the three projects marks a progression in his thinking about the relationship between matter, form, and the teleology

of social change. Our task in this paper is to engage with that thinking, pursue its philosophical implications, and mark its limitations.

While the firearms in *Palas por pistolas* disappear into the gardening shovels generated from their smelted materials, the menacing visible form of the weapons is retained in both *Imagine* and *Disarm*, in which pistols, rifles, and shotguns culled by the Mexican army are repurposed as musical instruments. The idea culminates in *Disarm*, for which Reyes automated and made operable via digital algorithms eight of the instruments from *Imagine*, freeing the performance from any appeal to virtuosity and enhancing the uncanny effect of the weapons' self-presentation as agents or, in the language of Bruno Latour, *actants*.<sup>2</sup> Each step of the series explores and demonstrates in a different way "how an agent of death can become an agent of life" (Reyes 2008), even if, despite the positive vision of the artist, the specter of death's agency refuses total elimination. We will think through the unseen liberatory but nonetheless disturbing functionality of this refusal through an immanent critique of Reyes's project(s), drawing on several theorists along the way. Following Adorno, we maintain that, insofar as they have a claim to truth, artworks must be freed to stand on their own as *objects*, that is, as crystalized processes of social mediation. Squaring with the objects themselves, we find that Reyes's overt intentions betray both a naive grasp of the philosophical sense of alchemical change and an objectionable messianism that promises more than art can—or should—fulfill, participating in the very commodity market logic that he claims to challenge and reject.

In other words, Reyes's implicit working from a metaphysics of presence<sup>3</sup>—a conception of the real as identical to the content of thought, and thus as available for control—undermines the critical force of the works themselves. However, as Jameson observes, "[t]o identify the formal contradiction at the heart of a work is not to criticize it but to locate the sources of its production: it is in other words . . . to articulate the form-problem that the work attempts to solve" (2017, 59–60). The peculiar form-problem with which Reyes grapples in his so-described alchemical projects—a form-problem that is not simply presupposed but is in part constituted by his manner of grappling—turns out to be more worthy of reflection than his solutions appear to suggest.

2 For Latour, an actant is "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation by human individual actors, nor of humans in general. An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action" (1996, 7).

3 Cf. Heidegger ([1957] 2002) and Derrida ([1967] 2016).

## 2. Matter and Form

The works present themselves through a formal complex of implicit directives or demands, independently of the artist's own self-conscious aims. Attention to the objects reveals an ongoing process of formation carried out on multiple levels of material and social *deformation*, where certain potentialities are actualized, thereby limiting or suppressing others. Understood hylomorphically, Reyes's gun-instruments, like other human artifacts and natural entities as well, resolve into more or less enduring composites of *matter* and *form*. Aristotle famously enumerated four "causes" [*aitía*] or explanatory principles for all phenomena, of which we will focus principally on (1) the *hyle*, "matter," or "that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists . . . e.g. the bronze of the statue, the silver of the bowl, and the genera of which the bronze and the silver are species" (*Physics* 194b24–26), and (2) "the shape [*morphe*] or form [*eidos*] which is specified in the definition of the thing" (*ibid.*). In order to foreground some fruitful tensions at play in Reyes's work, a summary account of concepts central to Aristotle's physics will be helpful.

In determining the essence or nature of an entity, Aristotle privileges the formal cause insofar as it is the ground of a thing's becoming what it *is*, in actuality [*energeia*] rather than mere potentiality [*dynamis*]. While my middle-aged tortie cat Jane Birkin is undeniably the fur, flesh, bone, teeth, claws, etc. that constitute her bodily presence, she is much more identifiable in virtue of the way these features are organically structured to fulfill the functions of catness. Human production first unfolds from the artist's conception, which presents a final form abstracted from any material substratum. With this model or blueprint in mind, the artist then imposes it on some appropriate matter, obeying the latter's own intrinsic laws, thus actualizing one possible objective presence [*ousia*] among many. The decision to pursue *this* actualization and not others at the same time freezes the dynamic potentiality of the chosen matter, suspending its agitation in a state of stability that can always be overturned through another formal intervention—to include destructive interventions of seemingly pure de-formation. When an artist or maker deliberately deforms a composite entity in an effort of productive repurposing, there are times at which traces of the previous form remain perceptible but now as part of the material background, indexing at once a past life and that life's futural potentiality as a nonpresence that haunts. It is crucial to keep in mind that "matter" and "form" are abstracted from each other only in theory. *In concreto*, there is no matter without form or form without matter. Even the

most chaotic heap of random material elements is still *formally* recognizable as . . . a chaotic heap of random material elements.

As Heidegger argues in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, “[t]he distinction of matter and form is *the conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics*” ([1935] 1971, 26–27, emphasis in original). Thus, although this schema has undergone significant modification through the path of its historical unfolding, our decision to take it as our point of departure is not arbitrary. What, we ask, is the *hyle* in Reyes’s alchemical designs? What is the *eidos*, the “form?” Since form follows function, the gun-instruments *are* devices for musical production, despite their contrary semblance. Reyes’s partial and essentially functional deformation of the confiscated weapons towards this end, we suggest, reveals a profound undercurrent to the theory of hylomorphism, which Aristotle neither explicitly alludes to nor even intimates. These objects, as sculptures, as musical instruments, show that the *hyle* must bear within its own *dynamis* the memory of what has yet to come, a recollection [*anamnesis*] that unfolds *forward*, even as it is haunted by the *forms* of the past. In other words, while it is true that the guns, the cartel’s “agents of death,” performed wildly unmusical functions, it is no less true that in so doing they were already inscribed with a kind of spectral potency of otherness—musical otherness—demanding to be *turned out* by force of the objects’ own intrinsic material principles. The actual assault rifle is simultaneously, at the level of radical material *potentiality*, a flute, and/or a guitar, and/or a drum, and/or so on. We must not forget that these primitive proto-guitars, industrial-grade flutes, and disturbingly flat-sounding percussive devices behaved not long before as the stuff of nightmares, active principles of death and the rupturing of community. This forgetting marks in an essential way the failure of the project *qua* “work” of art, which we would expect to *work* as a form of recollection in itself.

The ambiguity of the Greek concept of “matter” in connection with modern and contemporary materialisms (according to which “matter” is a homogeneous bearer of properties) is precisely the undecidability between the terms *hyle* (matter) as elucidated above, *hypokeimenon* (substratum), and *ousia* (substance, presence). The spectral violence that constitutes the *substance* of the gun-instruments’ music is definable in the mutually implicative terms of this conceptual indeterminacy. What is the *presence* of these sounds, discoverable in transitory ways in and by bodies? What is that which *lies under* the presence, accessible only by analogy, gathering together the presencing as such, despite the transitoriness of this or that concrete sound? In other words, what is the *hypokeimenon*, the “substratum”? What gets predicated of what? Can I predicate a “gun

form” of the instrument? Or can I predicate an “instrument form” of the gun? What ground supports what presence? What presence (analogically) *presents* what ground? Finally, what is the “matter,” the *stuff*, at dynamic play, tracing its silent potentiality through the presented thing? This tension, this undecidability, is essential to the peculiar aesthetic demands of the instrument and its ghostly emanations.

*Palas por pistolas*, Reyes’s first alchemical experiment, *points to* the radical implications of Aristotelian hylomorphism for aesthetic interventions into the social, but accomplishes little more. The *form* of the pistols was destroyed in a manner appropriate to the materials. Formed into shovels, the materials previously put to work in the service of violence now serve the end of planting the seeds of life. Reyes describes the project as follows on his official website:

1527 weapons were collected. 40% of them were high power automatic weapons of exclusive military use. These weapons were taken to a military zone [where] they were crushed by a steamroller in a public act. The pieces were then taken to a foundry and melted. The metal was sent to a major hardware factory to produce the same number of 1527 shovels. The tools were made under specifications such as a handle with a legend telling the story. [The] shovels have been distributed to a number of art institutions and public schools where adults and children engage in the action of planting 1527 trees. (Reyes 2008)

For Reyes, this is a form of “upcycling,” in which the artist appropriates discarded materials and moves them in a spiritual direction towards the Good. At once an ecological and aesthetic practice for the transformation of social conditions, upcycling makes sense within the logic of Aristotle’s hylomorphism as articulated above. Just as the silver of the bowl Aristotle gives as an example can be melted and repurposed into a pendant or ceremonial knife, the plastic bottles accumulating in our landfills and choking the oceans can be re-formed in the production of low-waste grocery bags, exercise clothing, and even automotive parts. Other notable artistic upcyclers include Derek Gores, who creates portraits and collages out of old magazines, discarded labels, and other similar materials; Vik Muniz, a producer of complex photographic objects out of such surprising ephemera as chocolate, jelly, and trash; and Khalil Chishtee, a Pakistani sculptor who fashions ghostly figures out of recycled plastic bags in an effort to “recycle our identity.”

In the case of *Palas por pistolas*, by contrast, it is difficult to say what marks the work *as* artwork; hasn’t Reyes here simply made himself a facilitator of gardening tools that one might purchase, say, at Home Depot? As works of *art*, it remains significant that the 1,527 shovels used to plant

1,527 trees used to be 1,527 weapons. Yet, Reyes elides this history in the cancellation of the form. In this case, then, we find a present hylomorphic substance—a synthesis of matter and form—*haunted*, not, as is always true, by the unique potency of the *hyle*, but by an annihilated form which is easily forgotten.

Easily forgotten—but for the legend “telling the story,” which Reyes helpfully affixed to each of the shovel handles. Is this where the *work* of the artwork lies? Is Reyes really a kind of poet, a producer of *text*? But the text only serves as a more or less indifferent *document* of the event, which is itself only one possible instantiation of the *concept*. Reyes is therefore a conceptual artist in the tradition of Joseph Kosuth and Douglas Huebler, the latter having once declared “[t]he world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I don’t wish to add any more” (Art Institute of Chicago 1974, 36). But the totems of past violence refuse oblivion in the indifference of textual narrative. As is evidenced by the one-to-one logic of the elaborated alchemical process (i.e., one weapon for one shovel for one tree), Reyes recognizes that the matter–form assemblage, and its fundamental undecidability, is not arbitrary; the peculiar power of art to *manifest* a world, and thus also the conditions of its interrogation, requires a concrete arrangement of matter with its own dialectical history for this coming-to-appear.

It is in the above sense that aesthetic *form*, that in virtue of which art “opposes the empirical,” amounts to what Adorno calls “sedimented content” ([1950] 1997, 5). The aesthetic *form* of artworks is that through which they “speak,” and such “speech” is nothing other than the “communication of everything particular in them” (*ibid.*) as a sedimented material history—a kind of “content”—irreducible to the facticity of the work’s empirical presence. Hence, in the next iterations of Reyes’s project the guiding problem evolves from the *matter–form* nexus to that of *form* and *content*. So restaged, however, as we will see, the new formulation cannot escape the menacing exigency of the material. Adorno tells us that “[i]n art, there is as much and as little progress as in society” (208), and, much earlier in the same text, that “[t]he unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form” (6). Contrary to how Reyes would have it, “[t]his, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society” (*ibid.*). Art cannot save society, and this is because artworks are themselves entangled with (though not reducible to) the latter’s productive logic; their peculiar power lies in bringing these tensions to the surface without explicitly articulating or simply reproducing them in another empirical scene.

### 3. Form and Content

Reyes's next project in this series, *Imagine* (2012), which he regards as “a progression of *Palas por pistolas*” (Reyes 2012), involved the fabrication of fifty musical instruments out of decommissioned weapons. *Imagine* pursues a similar tactic of transmutation, but, in this case, in order to create a unique aesthetic experience—understood as the nonidentical converse of the everyday<sup>4</sup>—instead of garden tools. The challenge was not only to transform the materials, but to enable the re-formed objects to produce musical sound. For Reyes, a sculptor, music has the transformative capacity to shape material presences and processes: “It also connects with ideas of social sculpture, in the physical transformation of the original materials, which also triggers psychological and social transformation. At the moment the new instruments are played they become agents of change, creating a musical event at which people gather in a positive manner” (Neri 2013). Previously the guns brought forth death. Now they bring forth music. However, since Reyes neither composes the music nor directly decides the direction of the sound the instruments produce, he is not in control of the social transformation that he strives to instigate. This tension is significant because it magnifies both the perverse power and presence of the objects, and the naivety of Reyes concerning his own works.

*Imagine*, as performed, shows the impossibility of harmonic coincidences between text and music.<sup>5</sup> The title comes from John Lennon's famous song of the same name, and the harmony and mellow interpretation preserved from Lennon's original only enhance the contradictions that this version presents. The lyrics are idyllic and full of hope, while the music barely reaches the prescribed tuning and therefore materializes the discomfort that the words seek to forget. A group of six professional musicians performed the song at concerts in Mexico City, Gwangju, Istanbul, and London. While participants gathered in positive anticipation of each performance, they encountered a surprising negativity: the music remained subtly out of tune, the sound of the instruments was harsh, and the musical range that the performers could reproduce was quite limited. Yet their joyous facial expressions betray an obliviousness to the impossibility of their aim. The flutist demonstrates his virtuosity as if playing *just a flute*, celebrating the musical form's successful overcoming of the

4 “Art's separation from the process of material production has enabled it to demystify the reality reproduced in this process” (Marcuse 1977, 22).

5 *Imagine Concierto*. YouTube, October 9, 2012. 5:59. URL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMW2VuGtM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMW2VuGtM).

vile materials. The show manifests a desire to recover the innocence expressed in Lennon's song, and as such amounts to an ingenuousness that ironically highlights the important negative tension at work.

By presenting this interpretation, Reyes is, like Lennon, "a dreamer," but, as dreamers do, he compresses and unwittingly actualizes the dark reality. The performance at once articulates utopia in the words and participates in everyday violence through the sound. Reyes describes and prescribes a positive public interaction but appears to miss the negative dimension at play. An immanent critique of the work in its own working manifests antagonisms that cannot be smoothed out in the neutralizing light of authorial intention. In the words of Adorno, "artistic productivity is the capacity for being voluntarily involuntary" ([1951] 2005, 222). Appropriating substantial symbols of pure hostility and nihilation as material parts for the articulation of a whole simply underlines the impossibility of the disappearance *in toto* of materiality into form. The dark remainder of the *hyle* simultaneously threatens the stability of *and* vouchsafes art's emancipatory power as an essential human possibility.

The content or "message" is ambiguous, blurry; it can be hard to tell if the music is presenting a relief *from* the violence or if it is *presenting* violence as a strong tendency. The ambiguity shows up as a confusion among the alethic modalities of possibility, reality, and necessity: what *may* be, what *is*, what *must* be, i.e., what is *determined* and/or what is *called for but has never been*. Further, such modal confusion manifests concretely in one's orientation to time, bringing into strange coincidence the "always already" of the pluperfect, and the mantic confidence of the future perfect. Jacques Attali articulates this vortical confusion, this alchemical undercurrent of out- and in-turning, in a discussion of the prophetic power of music:

Music explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future. (Attali [1977] 2009, 11)

Reyes's exploration of materiality and its proper *dynamis* foregrounds ambiguity; his instruments may nurture this prophetic capacity of music. But such a capacity is contingent on musical interpretation–adaptation, that is, on an intractable source of difference that threatens to undermine and call into question the purposes, conventions, and expectations assumed

and put into operation through Reyes's intentional schemes.<sup>6</sup> Reyes is giving new form to sedimented violence, and the musical sounds made possible only by that reformation enact in disturbing ways the violence's persistence. When he aims to transcend daily life by making audible the new world, he actualizes the totemic effect of the guns, echoing their fateful shots into the present.

For *Imagine* and *Disarm*, Reyes preserved the recognizable gun-form in order to change its production of content from death to music. Hannah Arendt claims that "Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is power" (1970, 53). In this sense, *Imagine* foregrounds the surprising impotence of gun-violence through an alchemical out-turning of the *substance* of these particular guns. What comes out of them now is material sound and not the material bullet, the former's ephemeral character and lack of solidity—its marginality at the place of the material as such—being of central import. The music, then, erases the possibility of killing while exercising but not exorcizing a *spectral* violence that is irreducible to mere "representation" or "simulation." *Mimesis*, imitation, is at once *methexis*, participation (Nancy 2016, 82). However, such a transmutation is not purely creative: the instrument-sound is an appropriation of the original gun-sound. Thus, what Reyes proposes is the possibility of translating violence into something that he characterizes as a positive, shared human experience, while at the same time undercutting the pleasure that one usually expects from music. Reyes strives to do both: to manifest some level of hope, and to

- 6 The infamous Slovenian avant-garde group Laibach has consistently exploited and demonstrated the radical potential of this aspect of performance qua interpretation, "translating" celebrated works of Western pop music to reveal disturbing undercurrents in the "originals," from Queen's "One Vision" to the Beatles' album *Let It Be*, and, more recently, the soundtrack to *The Sound of Music*. In the liner notes to their reinterpretation of the latter (a 2018 album also called *The Sound of Music*), the band provocatively quotes Kim Jong Il's *On the Art of Opera*:

Adaptation translates the ideological content of one original work into another in conformity with the characteristics of the latter form of art, literature or music. It requires the re-interpretation of a work in accordance with the characteristic of a different context on the principle of transforming the ideological content of the original . . . Adaptation is not technical practical work simply to translate a work into another form but a creative endeavor that requires originality. Originality in this work can ensure a more life-like and impressive portrayal of the seed of the original.

preserve the haunting threat of the violence that has been sublated. The music generated by the gun-instruments does not *describe* violence; it is not *social commentary*. Rather, it *lives* the violence in a gesture that cancels itself in a strange vortex, a locus of *in-* and *out-turning*, where the categories *real*, *necessary*, and *possible*, and tenses *past*, *present* and *future*, coalesce like the posset of Heraclitus's fragment: "even the barley-drink separates if it is not stirred" (DK B125).

We can find the ambiguity at work in Reyes's project, an ambiguity he tries to suppress, presaged in another fragment of Heraclitus: "The bow's [βίος] name is life [βίος] but its work is death" (DK B48). The harmony or attunement attained by the mutual working of the gun's parts is the death-dealing violence of its projectiles, the projection of death itself. The projection of the appropriated gun, in contrast, the "harmony"—whether mellifluous or dissonant—of its sounds, carries a transformation of the *living* body, but not in such a way that the gun's attunement is simply annulled. Is it now the *ground* of the life-trans-formative sound? Is it then a ground that *haunts*? Hence, again, we encounter the spectral violence of a presence that does not erase or bury its "other side," but which cannot *figure* its converse either, not without destroying the converse as such. To perform Lennon's song as an expression of radical hope is to purge the object of violence, but this ignores the way it stands forth *as* a gun even if it can be manipulated to approximate a flute. In fact, the optimistic air in which the instrument is strained to accompany a soft and mellow voice only heightens the brutality of the gun and makes more palpable the presence of the dead. The *telos* of the artist to purify the object of its past is a complete failure, but this failure is brought about by force of the object itself, which, as a crystallization of suffering, "weighs on the subject" (Adorno [1966] 1973, 17–18) in a way that is not "subjective." The object is capable of showing its truth, a necessary precondition of which, as Adorno asserts, is "the need to lend a voice to suffering" (17). The intention of enjoying this music as one does at a typical pop concert, of experiencing its "beautiful and amazing sounds," as the curator Nicholas Chambers puts it in a video about *Disarm*,<sup>7</sup> speaks to the ongoing commodification of violence in contemporary society and the will to transform the suffering of others into diverse forms of pleasure and entertainment.

The music for *Imagine* was played by well trained musicians who adapted to the novel instruments. But they performed music *inadequate* to those instruments: the instruments' *hyle*, that is, the visible gun-form,

7 Art Gallery of NSW, "Pedro Reyes 'Disarm' | #TogetherInArt What's in the Box?" (2020). URL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4-RbMfya4o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4-RbMfya4o).

is defiantly manifest, menacing the music and the materiality of its performance. Hence, the violence that is present in this way is transmuted into a liminal awareness of the negative reality through the music. This possibility, as discussed above, is beyond, and at odds with, the artist's goal of making "positive" use of art. As a self-standing work, *Imagine* explores the space towards which we gestured above: that undecidability between *hyle*, *hypokeimenon*, and *ousia*. Through the destabilizing slippage between *matter*, *substratum*, and *substance*, *Imagine* opens a radical moment in which musician, machine, and audience give shape to a critical substance that renews itself. Yet this potent assemblage is set in crisis when the artist insists on the "positive" purpose of his work and claims that the material change replaces violence with something new. What Reyes intends is impossible, and what he pretends to do with the materials would be palatable to a society without memory, or else a form of reified memory that is acceptable only when the objects tied to it facilitate pleasure or enjoyment.

#### 4. Revelation and Technique

It is in the disagreement between the thetic intention of Reyes's prescriptions and the disturbing recalcitrance of the objects that much of the revelatory force of *Imagine* lies. In the language of Heidegger, it constitutes a "shock" (*Stoss*, literally a blow or thrust) in which the listener is normatively *displaced* from ordinary, socially entrenched modes of relation. For Heidegger, "to submit to this displacement means: to transform our accustomed ties to the world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work" ([1950] 2001, 64). From the perspective of Heidegger's well-known critique of technology, the reductive ordering of the world and what shows up as possible through technical artifacts, such as guns, is suspended or called into question by the "shock" of the work of art, setting up those who "submit" to its nonviolent working to value and even *perceive* the world and its entities in a radically new way. *Art* work and *technology* work are thus infinitely separated to the extent that they are intimately connected (Heidegger [1954] 1977, 16).

The equivocal status of the work, where the threat of the weapons is annulled but sustained vestigially in the musical performance as a present absence, is necessary for the working of the work itself. Reyes's techno-optimism, the dominant form taken by the metaphysics of presence in the twenty-first century, prevents him from recognizing this disturbing but

fruitful counterpower at play. Describing the sublimatory intention of his approach, for example, Reyes asserts that “the physical act is always accompanied by an idealistic one and appeals to the spiritual dimension of this quasi-alchemical operation towards the good” (Goldman 2020). But the transcendence that such an idealistic gesture presupposes is really a veiled immanence, that is, the subjection of human interpreters to normative conditions of reality, or, in the language of Markus Gabriel (2015), “fields of sense.”<sup>8</sup> Works of art are in fact part of reality, perceptual and intelligible, constituting fields of sense whose scope extends beyond what gets characterized as “meaning,” i.e., what the artist in each case is supposed to have *meant* and realized through technique. As Gabriel puts it in *The Power of Art*, “Monet cannot produce my impressions, my psychological state. The artist by herself can neither predict nor produce the aesthetic experience I undergo in appreciating a work” (2020, 19). Consequently, “art itself is uncontrollable. No one, not even the artist, is in a position to steer the history of art” (7).

Reyes organized a group of musicians to open the *Disarm* exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in London on May 4, 2013. In this and later concerts, the performers, sometimes as many as nine, improvised free jazz on a selection of instruments derived from *Imagine*: polished hunks of steel make primitive drums, long rifle barrels framed by interlocking magazines hold taut three strings for what looks like a postapocalyptic lyre, arresting, atavistic shrieks crawl improbably out of an assault-clarinets, while one player attacks a xylophone fashioned from deconstructed pistols. The “Kalashniclock,” a circular percussion instrument constructed out of AK-47 barrels and twelve of the weapon’s iconic curved magazines, is particularly striking. The musicians, appearing like a postindustrial approximation of Ennio Morricone’s legendary Gruppo di improvvisazione nuova consonanza, would sit in a misshapen circle or some other formation in which their orientation to the audience was indirect and indifferent. Reyes did not participate as a musician in these events, and the players relied on techniques of avant-garde free improvisation, having no score or previous

8 For Gabriel, to exist at all means to “appear in a field of sense” (2015, 158), which

provides objective structures and interacts with the objects appearing within it. [The field] is already there, and objects can pass through it and change its properties. Fields are not horizons or perspectives; they are not epistemological entities or objects introduced to explain how we can know how things are. They are an essential part of how things are in that without fields, nothing could exist. (157–58)

preparation to follow. The live music of *Disarm* is grounded in the groundlessness of the individual performers' exploration of the various instruments' possibilities. In each iteration, the singularity of the instruments is sharpened.

Reyes was especially attentive to the visible form of the objects. He wanted to preserve their appearance as harmful, but also to make evident their dysfunctionality as sources of harm: "The various parts of these automatons are recognizable as shotguns, pistols and rifles; while they no longer pose the threat of physical harm, they keep the sheer might of their most recent purpose" (Reyes 2013). The "sheer might" of the ersatz killing machines is preserved in its very negation, a measure which, in virtue of the operativity of the machinic as such, unfolds itself objectively in the relation of the various parts of the work to the field as a whole. The conceptual progression from *Imagine* to *Disarm* is marked most essentially by Reyes's elimination of human performers from subsequent versions of the latter's exhibitions: "These machines are mechanical musical instruments; they can be programmed and operated via computers, making them capable of performing music concerts with compositions prepared beforehand" (*ibid.*). *Disarm's* freeing of the instruments from ongoing technical manipulation, a status that was never possible for the guns, results in the material realization of the machinic dream through the dynamic *formation* of a loosely aleatory performance, the absence of a performer of which operates as a most disturbing presence. As an automated orchestra, the aesthetic field at work carries out the machinic dreams of the castrated shotguns, pistols, and rifles to one day perform preprogrammed compositions in the bright air of the Lisson Gallery.<sup>9</sup> These dreams must be supposed to have gripped the machines even in their former, less reputable lives characterized by circulation in economies of death. Repelled by the notion that the objects might be praised or glorified despite their formal displacement, Reyes insists that the "pacifist" message of the work must be clear "so that the idea has currency for a general audience" (*ibid.*). But the truth opened up by the work depends in part on the dark allure of the guns *qua* guns; without the recalcitrance of this *hyle*, already a *tode ti*, a "this something," de-forming itself, the "message" would achieve total self-coincidence and so either disappear or remain somehow kitsch.

9 See *DISARM at Lisson Gallery* (YouTube, 10 April 2013, 9:54, URL: [youtube.com/watch?v=Kpuu8InHlvA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kpuu8InHlvA)) and *Disarm (Mechanized) II* (YouTube, 22 August 2015, 4:38, URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7Nq\\_RGQuc8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7Nq_RGQuc8)).

Reyes's messianic intentions betray a teleological conception of art. In this view, works of art work in but one temporal direction (defined in terms of "progress") and are justifiable only within the boundaries of a reified, romantic logic. His efforts to preempt and shape our interpretation of his works are an attempt to prevent the work from speaking for itself and to present them as mechanisms through which to change the present into a happy future. However, as Benjamin reminds us:

[O]ur image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. (Benjamin [1935] 1968, 254)

The artist's fixing of the objects with a very specific *telos*, coupled with his idealist conception of history that trades on an ideological notion of progress, effectively grasps after just such a "cheap" defrayal. Reyes's conceit that he can transmute shit into gold fails to recognize that doing so does not dispense with the shit. The shit is still there as the gold's less than pleasant converse: the *other*, unseen side of one's horizon of sense. In Adorno's language ([1969] 2005, 150), this understanding of alchemy is ultimately undialectical, falling into the trap of Hegel's fetishization of progress. If you fail to take seriously the shit *qua* shit, then you aren't transforming anything.

An essential part of this spectral *form-ation* is indeed the preserved fetishistic quality of the guns, which conceals itself while the objects are operative *as* guns, not despite, but *because* guns are fetishes. In a dense section of his *Minima Moralia* ([1951] 2005) titled "Magic Flute," Adorno traces the Kantian aesthetic criterion of "purposiveness without purpose," and the contemplative attitude in which the subject attends it, back to a frustrated omnipotence: "Contemplation, as a residue of fetishist worship, is at the same time a stage in overcoming it. As radiant things give up their magic claims, renounce the power with which the subject invested them and hoped with their help himself to wield, they become transformed into images of gentleness, promises of a happiness cured of domination over nature" (224). What emerges as a possibility is not a new but still arbitrary power, not, that is, a mere redistribution—even if more *egalitarian*—of already existing potencies; the *transformation* at issue is precisely that of the suspension of power as such. The peculiar potency of art lies in its *powerlessness*, which is not to be understood as weakness. There is,

rather, a kind of “magic” to the subtle “powerlessness” of art, the magic of beauty itself: “In the magic of what reveals itself in absolute powerlessness, of beauty, at once perfection and nothingness, the illusion of omnipotence is mirrored negatively as hope” (*ibid.*). Reyes’s artifacts, whose form consists of historically sedimented contents, contain this “magic,” an attribute that he does not acknowledge. By identifying his works of art as agents of social transformation, as the loci of a concrete and material power that is factually capable of changing our society, Reyes actually diminishes their paradoxically potent *powerlessness*. This claim made against the work of art in its “self-refusal” and “self-contained independence” (Heidegger [1954] 1977, 31) connotes a well-intentioned sentimentalism according to which the function of art is frequently confused with that of activism. The two spheres can and do meet, but the subordination of the former to the latter ignores the crucial sense in which, to paraphrase Heiner Müller, hewing closely to Benjamin’s thinking, art is not “humane” and revolutions mostly serve to “put the brakes on history” (Müller 1990).

As alluded to above, guns, as technological artifacts, are not value-neutral instruments awaiting a freely determined purpose. On the contrary, as Heidegger has laid bare, products of technology enframe the world in reductive ways by revealing material nature itself as mere resource for human ends of domination and control, and this systematic ordering of the possible into strict regimes of actuality cannot help but extend its reach into interhuman relations as well (Heidegger [1954] 1977, 18). In this role, the availability of guns reveals bodies in the world *as* objects to be annihilated, in virtue of which guns *work* a kind of violence even before a single shot is fired. Such is their fetishistic appeal as totems of power, even if—as Arendt argues—this violence in itself is insufficient to actualize power. The appeal is precisely, in Adorno’s words, “the illusion of omnipotence” ([1951] 2005, 224–25): the barbaric, Hobbesian fantasy of the firearm as the great equalizer.

What happens when these decommissioned totems are deprived of their hidden violent enframement in the *reworking* that is Reyes’s work? Something uncanny. Quite literally we see fetishes of violence “transformed into images of gentleness, of a happiness cured of domination over nature.” The locus of the active transformation is preserved in the image of the neutered weapons, thus establishing the sculptural-(auto)musical work as what Adorno describes in *Aesthetic Theory* as a “force field” of relational tension. The tension at play is precisely “the element of ‘form’ in which form gains its inner substance by virtue of its relation to its other” and is the result of “dissonant experiences or antinomial relations in the work” (Adorno [1970] 1997, 292). “Through its

inner tension,” Adorno goes on, “the work is defined as a force field even in the arrested moment of its objectivation” (*ibid.*). The tension between the muted violence of the weapons and the gentle, palliative promise of musical voices, even if dissonant, is maintained in dynamic play, unfolding a spatio-temporal contexture—inhabited, preserved, and augmented in different ways by the audience—that makes up the substantial *form* of the work as a whole. In Heidegger’s words, the “shock” of the work issues from its presence in a state of “agitated repose,” a kind of nonviolent vibration comparable to the stasis achieved by a hummingbird in flight.

The privileging of form (*eidos*) over matter (*hyle*) in Aristotelian metaphysics as the real source of substantial determination tends to obscure the fact that, even by the lights of this very metaphysics, there is no purely indeterminate *hyle* or even proto-*hyle*. Bare materiality without form is not even thinkable. In the case of *Disarm*, the *hyle* is the guns themselves, not the steel, wood, and plastic out of which the guns were generated through technological processes. For this reason, the *eidos*, the *form*, must be interpreted not simply as the automated musical performance and its preprogrammed composition, but as a dynamic act of *de-formation*, where the semiotically sedimented *hyle* is quietly, continuously, and necessarily without end “attacked” or eroded by its “other.” This, in the Heraclitean vocabulary of Heidegger, is the “strife” of the work’s working, which is instigated and kept going by and in the rift (*Riss*) opened up between *figure* and *ground*. With its multiple points of shock, this “strife,” which “is nothing violent” (Heidegger [1950] 2001, 64), is all the more evocative in Reyes’s work precisely because of the disturbing ambiguity of the figure–ground relation that originates and sustains its operative space. In the positive vision of Reyes, the “figure” must be the salvatory message of the music. But, like the marble “behind” or “beneath” Michelangelo’s *David*, set forth to glisten *as* marble, as if for the first time, *by* the figural presencing of a form, the .357 Magnum pistol that serves as ground for one of Reyes’s hi-hats rises up by force of its spectral menace to the level of figure.

## 5. Conclusion

By harnessing the efficient design of killing machines and reforming it into its other, Reyes’ work *presents* the allure of guns, but in an extraordinary way that resists both romantic justification and unequivocal symbolic representation. Thus, it is crucial for the working of the work, understood as an independently operating field, that the *positivity* of the overtly “pos-

itive message” is not realized in any final sense through a mere *negation* or cancelation of the guns’ violence. The work, in the words of Adorno, is a “force field” in which a tangle of social tensions is exposed and preserved but, being removed from the productive and economic logic of commodification, refuses to settle into a clear affirmation or denial. The spectral violence haunting the instruments refuses absolute negation, and this quiet obstinacy is a nihilating source of discomfort in virtue of which the work resists co-optation by the art world or music industry. Such a refusal persists despite, rather than because, of Reyes’s public pronouncements regarding the meaning and value of his own work. Reyes explicitly postures himself as somehow operating above the processes of commodity capitalism from which the guns emerged—interrupting or challenging its flow. But he is participating in the very process he claims to critique by extending it into different markets by way of different cultural institutions.

The violence that Reyes alchemically attenuates can be falsely identified as a problem peculiar to Mexico. However, given that this work has circulated mostly through advanced industrialized countries, it can be said that Reyes is redistributing, relocating, and displacing the revelatory violence of the gun-instruments as both vibrant historical documents and force fields constituted of suffering. By introducing to hallowed museum spaces a concrete node of communal trauma, *Disarm* effectively materializes the depth of a reality marked by the visible and unseen scars of global economic dynamics, and the production, circulation, consumption, and cultural representations of drugs and guns. Adorno suggests that the *documental* power of music, which is not to be understood as naively empirical, but rather as *truth bearing*, issues from the kind of play between *form* and *formed* (whether conceived as “matter” or “content”) that has been at the center of this essay. He writes:

All forms of music, not just those of expressionism, are sedimented contents. In them survives what is otherwise forgotten and is no longer capable of speaking directly. What once sought refuge in form subsists anonymously in form’s persistence. *The forms of art register the history of humanity with more justice than do historical documents.* ([1970] 1997, 37; emphasis added)

The philosophical interpretation we present in this paper resonates with Reyes’s stated purpose to “create psychological transformation and social transformation” in response to guns’ creation of “fear” (Reyes 2013); however, by focusing on the alchemically ineliminable *dark obverse* of the positive vision as an essential component of that transformation, we have tried to pursue a descriptive path more respectful of the works’ objective

independence. *Disarm* is a bridge between past, present, and future because it presents us with the material hauntings of the past and motivates an alteration of relational modes to and in our present which is at once, whether implicitly or explicitly, the projection of a meaningful *not yet*. To identify the work of art as a “force field,” as Adorno does, is to name it as the vortical space that keeps open the undecidability between the real, the possible, and the necessary—that point of simultaneous distance and overlap between the *pluperfect* and the *future perfect*. The pertinence of Adorno’s ideas to the philosophical illumination of Reyes’s work is reflected in Lutz Koepnick’s reminder of what Adorno’s “modernist view” was all about:

to keep alive the promise of a future able to eliminate fear, the promise of a future in which we no longer need to dread what cannot be predicted and in which we can be curious about what exceeds existing templates of interpretation, explanation, and understanding. (Koepnick 2017, 31)

The importance of Reyes’s work lies in the tension manifested in the transmutation of materials and the negative experience transmitted through sound, performance and appearance. The hope and social change that Reyes envisions and attempts to enact is made real not because of his good intentions, but because of a latent negativity that can be exercised but never exorcized, a nihilating ground that can never be figured, but which, nonetheless, the music and physical aspects of the instruments reveal. This material effect surpasses the presuppositions that pre-form his effort, thereby demonstrating the dimension of the “voluntarily involuntarily” formulated by Adorno. The negative materiality of both the re-formed pieces and the sound generated by them, in the making-present of an absence, a kind of haunting, is called for by the working of the work. This thrust of the haunted form’s conflict with an entirely new and incalculable dawning of sense arrests the participant in a kind of shock, in Heidegger’s sense unpacked above, consequently treating the “public” itself as a material to be turned inside out in the impossible task of locating its own, de-formed and de-forming, *hyle*, the veritable *stuff of which it is made*.

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# John Dewey's Philosophical Naturalism and a Pragmatist Approach to Conceptual Art

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## Abstract

The emergence of conceptual art is one of the most profound changes that has ever taken place within the cultural sphere of artistic practices. Naturally, the deviation of conceptual art from traditional art forms has been intensely debated. However, pragmatist art theory and aesthetics has placed relatively scarce emphasis upon this significant divergence. Hence, the aim of this paper is to introduce a coherent pragmatist approach to conceptual art; one that explains the emotionalized expression of meaning through conceptual art objects which, on the face of it, appear to lack the potential for conducting such experiential functions. The main discussion concerns the relation between the constitutive parts and the whole of a work of art. In particular, I highlight the peculiar role of contextual information in the process of interpreting and experiencing conceptual art objects. The ideas put forward are based on John Dewey's philosophical naturalism, which also comprises the broad theoretical framework for this study.

## Keywords

philosophical naturalism, philosophical pragmatism, conceptual art, aesthetic experience, John Dewey, Felix Gonzalez-Torres

## Introduction

The emergence of conceptual art was one of the most important developments in the cultural sphere of the twentieth century. According to Marcel Duchamp, “[e]verything was becoming conceptual, that is, it depended on things other than the retina” (Cabanne 1971, 39). Through sensory channels, a color, for example, can lend its unconscious associative meanings to new perceptual wholes. Indeed, the colors of a rose, a bridal dress, a state flag, or a painting are not arbitrary, but carefully chosen to

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evoke the desired type of emotional tone in the experiences of audiences. It is precisely this potential of colors—as well as a wide range of other perceptual materials—to automatically lace human experience with specific accents that was being renounced in the shift towards the conceptual described by Duchamp. The most profound aspect of this transformative period is not the introduction of ready-made objects but the abandonment of ready-made meanings; conceptual art exhibits an ambition to expand the role of the artist from a creative modifier of meanings to a creative inventor of meanings. Consequently, automatic and general sensory cues have increasingly given way to personally acquired specific knowledge in the constitution of experiences of art. This turn from the appearance to the idea has carried over into the twenty-first century. Today, a considerable proportion of contemporary art is focused on conceptual content.

Naturally, such a dramatic, as well as enduring, deviation from traditional artistic practices has been intensely debated in academic journals and elsewhere. A common attitude in these debates is articulated in, for example, Goldie and Schellekens's *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (2007), an edited collection of analytic philosophy, in which it is stated that “there is one artistic movement which has claimed that art should invariably aim to engage its audience intellectually, and, moreover, that it need not do so aesthetically or emotionally” (ix).

In this paper, however, I take an alternative approach with regard to both the philosophical orientation as well as the description of conceptual art as highlighted above. The main difference concerns the separation of the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the emotional from one another—a common distinction in philosophy, as evinced by the quotation from Goldie and Schellekens above. Admittedly, language does render it possible to analyze these aspects of experience individually. Yet, such a rigid partition is not how the experiencing human mind—as a dynamic unitary structure of nature—functions in practice. For instance, the ever-present emotional incentives are constantly needed to dispel total apathy—a state of being which is hostile to the emergence of both intelligence and the aesthetic quality of experience.

Hence, instead of segregation, an integral interconnectedness of experiential features comprises a key premise for this paper. The unitary structure of human experience described above fits into the broad field of philosophical naturalism and, especially, the more specific framework of philosophical pragmatism. It is crucial to note that the latter, in particular, makes a fundamental departure from all classic accounts of philosophy. The historical line, as well as the modern-day derivatives, of classic philosophy are predominantly focused on introducing ways of combining men-

tal features after an initial, and often a priori, separation of these features into various enclosed categories. In contrast, the founders of philosophical pragmatism, including John Dewey, argued that following the discoveries of Charles Darwin such detours were neither necessary nor tenable; human ontology and cognition could thereafter be understood on the model of interactions occurring in nature. Consequently, many traditional philosophical doctrines, such as mind–body dualism, were deemed insupportable.

Today, the validity of these pragmatist premises is reinforced by a multitude of modern natural scientific ventures into the psychophysical constitution of human beings (see Franks 2010, 10, 86–88, 204; see also Popp, 2007)—although we should be cautious of oversimplifying the matter by treating it as purely biological or physical: as Dewey insists, the natural sciences alone are insufficient in explaining the entirety of human activity: “We cannot direct a course of interactions without counting and measuring, but the interactions are more than numbers, spaces and velocities” (Dewey [1925] 1981, 216). For example, culturally motivated and teleologically driven behavior tends to escape exact mathematical definitions and predictions. On that account, the humanities do belong among the sciences, as long as transcendent or any other supernatural premises and explanations are avoided. As such, philosophical pragmatism, whose main premises are that the experience of art is a natural phenomenon and that the one and only reality of nature consists of a continuum of interactions (from the subatomic to the social and cultural), offers a productive basis for discussing conceptual art.

On the whole, as a study within the framework of philosophical pragmatism, neither the contents nor the goals of this paper pertain to eternal truths or immutable transcendent realities. Rather, the approach of this paper reflects Dewey’s call ([1920] 1982, 151) for a change in the philosophical agenda from the “vain metaphysics and idle epistemology” to a more active guidance for modern civilization. In other words, Dewey maintains that philosophical undertakings should focus—even if indirectly—on concrete improvements of human life as it unfolds in physical, cultural, and social environments. Furthermore, Dewey holds that art, too, possesses a considerable role in rendering life more meaningful, worthwhile, and also communal. He views works of art as potentially “marvelous aids in the creation of such a life” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 87). Hence, in this paper, I discuss the particular ways in which conceptual art, and its profound shift in emphasis from the appearance to the idea, furthers the attainment of modes of desirable living—an issue possessing considerable relevance in the field of philosophical pragmatism.

Accordingly, I put forward a pragmatist approach to the psychophysical constitution of an aesthetic experience in the context of conceptual art. The suggested approach is based upon Dewey's view of the experiencing human mind as a complex—but nonetheless unitary—natural whole. Within this frame of reference, I examine specific cognitive modes of preparing this wholeness for experiencing conceptually oriented art objects in a consummatory fashion. In particular, I disclose mechanisms through which primarily intellectual works of art can potentially fulfil the aesthetic condition set by Dewey, according to which “no intellectual activity is an integral event (is *an* experience), unless it is rounded out with this quality” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 45; emphasis in original). For this purpose, I use a specific case example; namely, a conceptual artwork by Felix Gonzalez-Torres entitled “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*). This particular work of art—discussed in the latter half of this paper—highlights the difficulties as well as the benefits of the conceptual approach to artistic endeavors. However, prior to this case study, it is imperative to state the reasons for discussing conceptual art within a specifically Deweyan framework and, also, to provide an overview of the relevant key points of Dewey's philosophical program. The latter includes, in the following order, the unique characteristics of human experience, the constitution of concepts, and the relation between the aesthetic quality of experience and artistic practices.

## John Dewey and Philosophical Pragmatism

Of the founders of American pragmatism, John Dewey provides the most comprehensive and coherent theory on art and aesthetics. In his *Art as Experience* ([1934] 1987)—one of his principal works—Dewey puts forth a generally applicable pragmatist theory of art and aesthetics. As the title suggests, Dewey holds that art should be understood, first and foremost, as concerning experiences. Of course, the concrete material objects that audiences interact with in order to evoke the experiences of art matter too, but the artistic value of material objects of any kind stems from their influence on human experience: without the capacity to bring about aesthetic quality in the experiences of audiences, a material object cannot be deemed an art object. In short, Dewey defines a work of art as an experience evoked in, and through, an interaction with a material object. Accordingly, the unifying link that connects all domains of fine art to one another is to be found in the similarity of experienced qualities rather than of material features of physical objects.

Dewey's theory takes into account an unusually wide range of aspects that play a part in the constitution of an aesthetic experience of art—including, but not limited to, material objects, laws of physics, human cognition, the social sphere, natural and cultural evolutions, and situational particularities. All of the above, as inherently connected to each other, affect the phenomenon of art in the broadest sense of the term; taken individually, they are insufficient in determining fine art or explaining experiences of it.

Moreover, Dewey's voluminous writings extend beyond the comprehensive theorization on art and aesthetics. For example, in his treatise *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* ([1938] 1986), he scrutinizes intellectual operations, including the formation of concepts, in an equally systematic fashion. However, Dewey does not develop a consistent theory on the possibilities of combining these two areas of his philosophical undertaking—that is, not beyond their common foundation in the general human constitution, which, as stated above, he examines meticulously.

In his discussion of aesthetic modes of thinking, Dewey does, indeed, briefly refer to intellectual art. He opines that “the strictly intellectual art will never be popular as music is popular” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 45). In addition, Dewey incidentally ponders the possible future convergence of the subject matters of fine art and mathematical sciences. He states that

it is possible that there may come a day in which subject-matter that now exists only for laborious reflection, that appeals only to those who are trained to interpret that which to sense are only hieroglyphics, will become the substance of poetry, and thereby be the matter of enjoyed perception.

Dewey ([1934] 1987), 154

Yet, neither of the two themes are developed to a conclusion in Dewey's writings. This paper is a continuation of these discussions in the context of contemporary artistic procedures, thus augmenting Dewey's pragmatist theory of art and aesthetics.

Of course, a significant body of literature about art and aesthetics already exists in the pragmatist tradition. For example, Richard Shusterman, Joseph Margolis, and Arnold Berleant each provide substantial input (see Shusterman 1992, Margolis 2009, Berleant 1991). Yet, pragmatist scholars have not engaged in a systematic and continuous Deweyan discourse on conceptual art, although the relationship between Dewey and conceptual art is occasionally brought up (see Stroud 2007 and Sullivan 2002). Admittedly, no fundamental contradiction between conceptual art and more traditional artistic forms arises directly from Dewey's theorization. Hence, an argument can be made that from a Deweyan standpoint, the

specifics of this divergence are not relevant enough to warrant extensive investigations. However, with this paper, I support the view that even if the differences between the artistic modes are not foundational, they are not trivial either, especially with regard to Dewey's view of the role of art in the efforts to render human life more enjoyable and meaningful through aesthetic experiences. Overall, this paper contributes to the somewhat neglected area of pragmatist aesthetics and art theory that concerns conceptual art.

## Dewey on Human Experience and the Constitution of Emotionalized Meanings

The human experience defined as a natural phenomenon within the continuum of animal experience is the leitmotif of Dewey's entire philosophical project. (His book titles *Art as Experience* and *Experience and Nature* attest to this.) For Dewey, the continuous human experience is always based upon various forms of interaction. Moreover, this dynamic process incorporates physical as well as sociocultural dimensions; the latter emerges from and functions through the former.

In addition, Dewey uses a distinctly italicized "an" to demarcate an occurrence of *an* experience from other broader notions, such as accumulated life experience. This emphasized "*an*" denotes a marked break from life's predictable routines, whether they be sensory, social, artistic, athletic, mathematical, or the like. For example, as Dewey mentions, in any area of life a person may utter "that was an experience" after undergoing circumstances which defy habitual expectations and occupy one's attention for a definable timeframe (Dewey [1934] 1987, 43). Importantly, this interruption of the ordinary course of living has to be dominated by a single unifying quality, which pervades, and in doing so defines, the experienced total situation (*ibid.*, 44). For example, an extraordinary taste may establish "that dessert" as *an* experience.

In this example, the experience is, to a considerable degree, based upon a concrete fulfilment of a vital need; this particular satisfying response to sensory stimulation evolved in environmental conditions where sugars and fats were hard to come by. The experience conjoins the intake of specific nutrients and the continuity of life into a coherent meaning, the value of which is unconsciously estimated but nonetheless emotionally felt in conscious awareness. In general, an emotion reports an instinctual initial estimate about the encountered situation and its presumed consequences. That is, an emotion performs the function of an automatic guide for

grasping the meaning of perceived objects, events, and affordances based on the value or harm they supposedly bring to the process of overcoming various challenges of life. This applies to most organisms and most problems—from the primitive and sensory to the enculturated and conceptual. Of course, cultural beliefs and personal peculiarities sometimes affect the specific relations between meanings and emotions instituted through natural evolution. For example, the emotions arising from a conscious recognition of the long-term risks posed by obesity to the continuity of life may directly contradict the emotions induced by a high calorie intake. Appreciation of slowly cumulating health hazards does not as such sour the taste of delicacies, but conscious awareness of far-reaching consequences may at times impair the overall experience of having a dessert due to the conflicting value assessments that feature in that overall experience.

In addition to an explicit discord, human enculturation may also bring about intentional transmutations to embodied meanings. In an artistic context, the experienced effects of physical materials are often intentionally transformed and repurposed (Dewey [1934] 1987, 69–70, 205). Especially in the fine arts, audiences have been conditioned to respond to stimuli in ways that partly diverge from the inborn reactions brought about by the embodied background of human evolutionary history. For example, in the wilderness, sudden loud sounds nearby generally indicate that an immediate threat is unfolding. However, in some contemporary situations the visceral response of escape has been nullified through cultural upbringing; the bodily excitement remains but no longer leads to fear and anxiety, which have been replaced with aesthetic enjoyment. For instance, people attending a rock concert do not instinctively try to escape from the venue when the first chords are struck. Encultured audiences have learned to enhance the enjoyment of perceptual objects of their liking—such as melodies and harmonies—with the experienced intensity of exceptionally loud sounds that would otherwise indicate impending harm. A musical performance is not a matter of actual life and death, but it bears experiential resemblance to such matters—especially in the intensity of the experience, even if not always in other ways.

Traditionally, mastering the ability to control organic value assignments in the context of material objects defines the technical competence of an artist, and this applies to conceptually oriented art practices as well. However, for the most part, the conceptual approach to art does not arouse what meaningfulness of an experience of art it arouses through modes of extraordinary sensory stimulation. Conceptual art is predominantly devoid of explicitly personified skillful ordering of sensory mate-

rials, whether they be paints applied to canvas, notes of music as motion of air molecules, or the movements and gestures of actors or dancers on stage. In conceptual art, meanings can—and often do—function more in the manner of an awareness of obesity than they do in the manner of a strong sensory impact such as a distinct taste. This type of approach to artistic practices is something of a double-edged sword. Arguably, the renouncement of overt use of tacit meanings—even in their artistically transfigured incarnations—helps artists to increasingly step outside the confinements of a meaning-formation mechanism that derives from evolutionary pressures. As a consequence, wholly new possibilities for directing the experiences of audiences open up. On the other hand, though, if culturally—or sometimes even situationally—instituted conventional meanings are not conjoined with deep-rooted tacit ones, the characteristic intensity of a genuine experience of art tends to remain elusive. Manipulation of exclusively conventional, rather than mostly tacit, meanings handicaps efforts to bring about exceptionally meaningful aesthetic experience in audiences.

In order to attain the passionate vigor of art, conceptually oriented artists tend to emphasize highly meaningful—as in emotional—ideas, instead of emphasizing vivid sensory stimulation and material objects explicitly marked by personal touch. Sometimes the latter two might even be considered as obstructing the clarity of the idea; thus, many conceptual artists gravitate towards some form of sensory minimalism. In an experience of conceptual art the full emotional intensity hits primarily after—and only through—conscious interpretation of the substance of the work. This contrasts with the more traditional methods of art, in which the unconscious—even if culturally transformed—emotionalization renders the process of interpretation *itself* intense, and commonly from the very outset. Carried to an extreme, a traditional artist may, within limits, ignore the significance of *what* is expressed and focus solely on *how* the subject matter is expressed. In principle, this is totally acceptable for all artists, even if not necessarily practically feasible for the conceptually oriented, for whom the incubation phase of interpretation does not hold particular aesthetic relevance without the consummate idea.

In the latter half of this paper, I scrutinize certain key peculiarities of this switch to emphasizing the fruits of long-term thought in the context of fine art. But first, it is necessary to briefly examine the foundations of human cognition that enable the extension of, and shift in, the focus of human awareness from the immediate sensory surroundings towards the generalized and the conceptual. Also, the topic warrants an overview of

the general ways in which these cognitive structures relate to aesthetic experiencing and artistic endeavors.

## Extension of the Human Perceptual Horizon

As discussed above, human beings and the majority of other advanced animals possess an experiential capacity for an almost immediate assessment of the direct benefit or harm effected by present tactile circumstances. In addition, both have developed an ability to imaginatively (or proto-imaginatively in the case of animals with less developed cognitive capacities) experience potential outcomes of activity in a somewhat similar, as in emotionally meaningful, fashion. For example, the delight from expected future benefit motivates and the fear of future harm deters. In short, the survival of an organism is rendered more probable when emotional guidance is applied not only reactively but also proactively. It should be noted that the majority of advanced species share a common base of sensory capabilities. Yet, the mutually reinforcing combination of cognitive evolution and progressive enculturation has rendered human beings by far the most capable of forming spatiotemporally distant, generally complex, and increasingly abstract expectations.

In Dewey's philosophical program, the scope of perceptions, and consequently that of experiences, extends from verified relations to propositional "if-then" relations. The emotional intensity of the latter is a sensory derivative of the assumed consequences that the imagined "then" would bear upon life, if ever actualized in the concrete. For example, imagining an upcoming wedding can match, or even surpass, the actual ceremony in emotional excitement.

Nevertheless, whether a taste of a wedding cake or a ceremonial dance, an imagined occurrence is always vaguer than a concrete occurrence. The former is always more or less of a hypothetical generalization based on previous contacts with similar materials and combinations. This detachment from direct interaction is a first step towards conceptualization. However, the loss of visceral details does not—necessarily—amount to a confusion or a decrease in emotionalized meanings.

A generalization is constituted upon a discovery of a specific unifying thread among particulars—a type of "meaning-concentrate" prepared in thought. With such a distinct and verified coherence in meaning comes an emotional clarity in bodily experience, as the two are integrally linked (Määttänen 2015b, 72). Furthermore, the relationship between meanings and emotions carries through to the practice of devising operations on

the basis of generalizations; that is to say, the linkage persists through the constitution of concepts.

Importantly, as planning relates to hypothetical outcomes, it, too, is a form of emotionally guided activity. Hence, the establishment of a specific relation between a generalization and a planned goal—as in the constitution of a concept—provides an opportunity for an artistic intervention. Conjoining two different catalysts of emotional response is open to a diversity of creative combinations. And so no fundamental principle prevents the implementation of concepts—long since established or more recent in origin—as definite parts in the constitution of experiences of art.

## Concepts as Ideational

Dewey describes a concept as an idea tested and, consequently, defined by a set of practical or abstract operations (Dewey [1929] 1984, 89). For example, the concept of sweetness is derived from numerous instances of experiencing particular sweet tastes. The former is a well-founded estimate about a specific type of experiential quality as an outcome of an interaction between certain environmental materials and bodily organs. This particular hypothesis about the tone of future experiences guides the choice of procedures, for example, in the act of baking. In short, Dewey's definition of a concept is somewhat akin to a template; its main function is to aid in responding to specific types of challenges. Moreover, as the problems of human life range from the physical to the social, and sometimes even to the wholly abstract, so too do conceptualizations.

Furthermore, in Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, action is an integral constitutive part in the formation of both perceptions and conceptions, which develop in a "functional correlativity with each other" (Dewey [1938] 1986, 115). The former discovers problems and the latter suggests solutions (*ibid.*). However, certain restrictions apply. For example, in a neuroscientific discussion about the priority of action, David Franks emphasizes that "[o]ur senses and the nature of our brains impose strict limits as to how and what we can conceptualize and categorize" (Franks 2010, 206). Even highly abstract as well as emphatically social concepts arise from bodily activity and embodied reasoning, and all of these invariably manifest in continuous human intercourse with the surrounding environment and other living beings.

In the end, it is repeatability in attaining specific goals of human life that determines the tenability of any concept. However, as discussed above, not only achievements and failures after the concrete fact, but also

achievements and failures as predictively entertained and expected in imagination, emotionalize experienced value. On this account, any tool—even a conceptual one—that is perceived as embodying means for overcoming problems possesses aesthetic potential.

## Constitution of an Aesthetic Experience

Discussing Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience requires forgoing definitions of the aesthetic put forth in traditional philosophy. Of course, Dewey theorizes terms such as beauty or the sublime, staples of conversation in classical aesthetics. However, his description of an aesthetic experience is neither based upon nor defined by such terms.

For Dewey, an aesthetic experience relates to the encountered resistances of life and, more specifically, perceptions of overcoming them in a consummatory fashion. That is, the aesthetic quality emerges in accordance with experiencing an anticipated solution to a problem. On that account, “[e]sthetic experience is imaginative” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 276). Furthermore, sometimes even the consciously held expectations are based on unconscious detection of possibilities, as in intuition. In any case, the emphasis is on the prospective, because the aesthetic quality relates to the hypothetical outcomes, as does the conceptual by its suggestive nature. An actualization of an outcome in the concrete may very well be emotionally satisfying. However, experiencing a satisfactory concrete outcome introduces aesthetic quality primarily in its perceived relation to overcoming unresolved challenges, the probability of which the factual outcome renders more likely in imaginary estimates. For example, tasting raw cookie dough may very well be a satisfying experience in the present moment. Yet, in order for this experience to incorporate aesthetic quality, the concrete present taste has to be perceived as indicative of, for example, a hypothetical future taste of a desired kind; the latter, of course, a potential outcome of eating finished cookies baked from the dough. In short, the taste of dough is experienced as a promise of delicious cookies. As Pentti Määttäen aptly summarizes the Deweyan disposition, “an aesthetic experience is a promise of consummation, and this promise is enjoyable in itself” (Määttäen 2015a, 97).

However, any final consummation in absolute sense is neither achievable nor desirable. Life consists of a rhythmic alteration of tension and release, as various balances needed for upholding psychophysical existence and well-being are continuously lost and restored. This dynamic takes place on, as well as joins together, multiple levels of cognition. The phys-

iological, the social, and the mathematical are examples of human capabilities that may be entrusted a leading, a supporting, or an equal role in overcoming an encountered resistance—depending on the requirements of the situation.

Moreover, as problems vary in their relevance for a human being, so does the intensity of the aesthetic quality of experience. The aesthetic arises as the defining quality over other qualities only when the challenging situation and, especially, the mode of overcoming it are perceived as highly significant for the experiencing individual. Otherwise, the aesthetic as a part of total experience is shallow, transient, and quickly forgotten. In the latter case, the aesthetic quality does not substantially affect personal growth or communal life.

## Dewey on Art and Expression

Dewey bases his theory of art on the aesthetic quality of experience. In fine art, an aesthetic experience is idealized. However, Dewey does not mean “ideal” in the sense of absolute perfection or anything transcendent. The term “extraction” captures the gist of his theory regarding the expression of the ideal in art. Dewey states that “[e]tymologically, an act of expression is a squeezing out, a pressing forth” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 70). He mentions the mechanics of a wine press as an example. He does not discuss thirst specifically, but the purpose of a wine press is to convert raw materials of nature, in this case grapes, to a more ideal form. It is not that grapes cannot be enjoyed raw, but in certain situations extracted juice, as such or as further developed into wine, provides a heightened emotional response of satisfaction. In other words, bodily experience verifies that thirst is more effectively quenched with juice than with grapes. For a person experiencing thirst—an emotional indication of a life-threatening imbalance—the seeds and the pulp are obstructions to the satisfaction of a need. Therefore, extracted juice, as material *expressed* through a filter, is a more ideal way to overcome the problem of restoring a balanced hydration, and, consequently, removing thirst from the present experiential whole.

In most situations in life, the desirable is often entangled with the irrelevant and the obstructing. This applies not only to grapes but to social and cultural objects as well. For example, in real life even the most loving relationship is saturated with constant distractions and tediums of daily living. And from time to time, even individuals who are in a loving relationship want to experience the satisfaction of “ideal” love through some-

thing like fictional romantic films. This is not to say that fantasy love is more satisfactory than actual love. The issue is that the great majority of encultured individuals have emergent needs that no amount of nutrition or concrete love can satisfy. Such are the needs of imaginative perception, which comprises the domain of fine art.

Unlike physiological needs, the fulfilment of which requires specific molecules, the criteria for satisfying the needs of imagination are more psychological and, consequently, more flexible. Nonetheless, competent artists recognize—sometimes unconsciously—certain general conditions for producing especially satisfying outcomes in imagination, first in their own imagination and, subsequently, also in the imaginations of audiences with experiential backgrounds that overlap with the artists’.

For example, storytellers are well aware of the fact that audiences do not want to hear about every single step undertaken by the main characters, as the narrative would be saturated with trivialities and dull monotonies. Storytellers have to focus on those parts that crystallize the essence of the described journey; that is, an alluring narrative should strongly emphasize the most relevant aspects of overcoming the primary problem encountered by the protagonists. Only through such intentional discrimination, even if it means gross exaggeration, is it possible to effectively satisfy the needs of the audience’s imagination.

In a similar fashion, all artists strive to extract from conscious and unconscious personal materials that which aesthetically inspires imaginative perception. This takes place in conceptually oriented art too, because, as Dewey notes, “an experience of thinking has its own esthetic quality” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 45)—from which it is, of course, possible to extract further artistic outcomes. Henceforth, I will use the term “scenario” to describe these distilled objects and events that play out in imagination. In addition to scenes upheld in visual imagination, the term “scenario” also captures a diversity of conceivable eventualities, including, but not limited to, intangible relations and social schemata.

In an artistic context, the constitution of these imagined aesthetic scenarios is initiated and directed through a proper interaction with physical objects of art. Importantly, in distinctively artistic instances the emerging imaginary objects, situations, and events unfold only in the experiences of artists and audiences, not in the surrounding environment. For example, *Spring* from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* does not bloom in anyone’s garden, but in the minds of audiences, which is the sole locus for experiencing such an abstract scenario of fine art. Accordingly, artistic scenarios can be extremely inarticulate, as is the case with this particular example of instrumental music. Yet, they are, whenever successful, especially poignant;

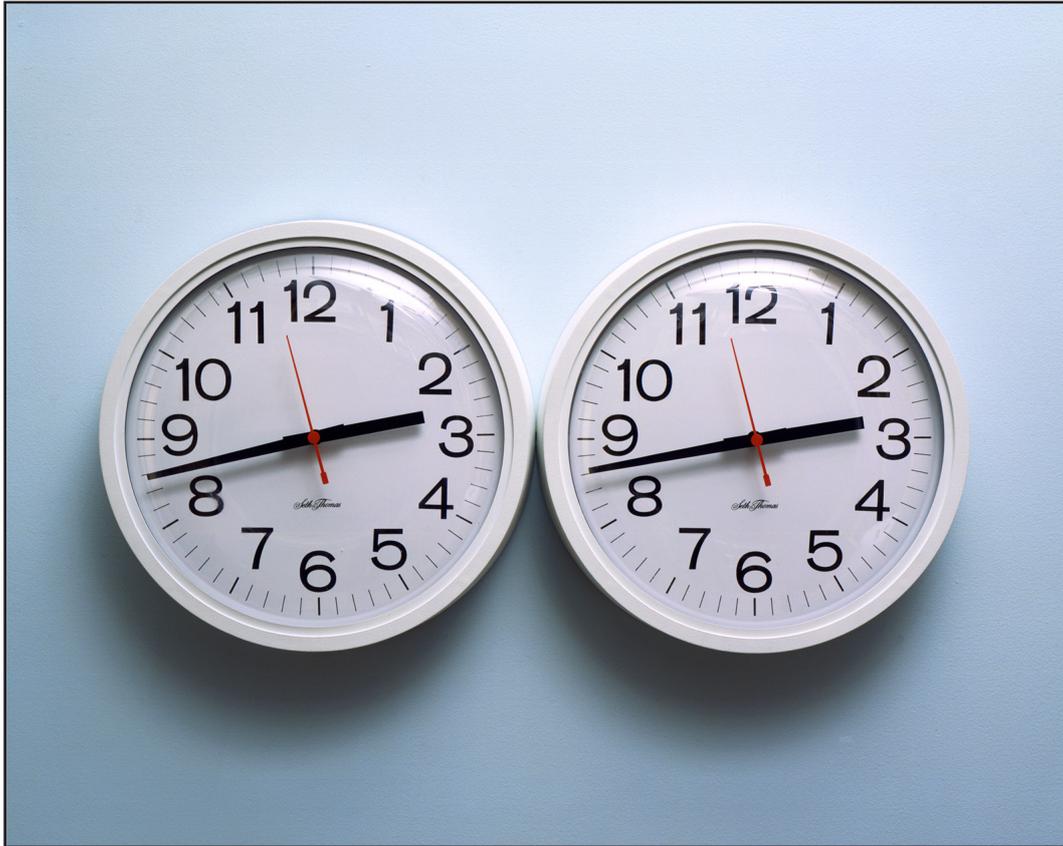


FIGURE 1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (*Perfect Lovers*), 1991. Wall clocks and paint on wall. Overall dimensions vary with installation; original clock size: 14 inches diameter each. Photographer: Peter Muscato. © Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Image courtesy of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

more so than the suggestive associations evoked by sounds or sights of common everyday situations. Artworks pinpoint meaning and arouse emotion in an unadulterated fashion, as they are designed solely for this particular purpose. For example, a joyful tune is a constitution devoid of any unnecessary elements or potential distractions; instead of dispersive rivalry for attention, every part and detail contributes to the same distinct, unified, and consummatory experiential goal. Even when artists want to confuse their audiences, they usually aim for a specific type of confusion that fits particularly well within a particular rhythmic alteration of resistance and relief. And the full aesthetic depth of art has to do with the question of whether undergoing such an experience, as a whole, aligns with the broader rhythms of the overall life of an individual member of an audience—that is, whether a work of art fits one’s life in a way that renders the experience especially worthwhile and memorable, whether it is intimate and touching rather than exogenous and distant.

## The Problem of Expressiveness in Conceptual Art

In Dewey's philosophical framework expressiveness is the crux of fine art (Dewey [1934] 1987, 277). It is defined as the use of some material medium in such a way that it constitutes "the meaning not of what it physically is, but of what it expresses" (Dewey [1934] 1987, 205). That is to say, the experienced effects of physical materials are repurposed, traditionally more or less in the manner described by the example of a loud rock concert, or in the way that a red rose may be an expression of love even if the flower as a physical object is not isomorphic with the particular experiential state of an individual human being. This type of embodiment of emotionalized meaning is the hallmark of traditional art objects. The overall composition may be novel and culturally motivated, but the constitutive parts rely heavily upon widely shared meanings established during natural evolution.

The great difficulty of conceptual art resides precisely in the fact that it does not always rely on commonly used operational rules or shared meanings. In conceptual art, the tools of interpretation, as in meanings, may be established for each individual art object separately—not as general guidelines for the entire field. Thus, conceptual art takes to the extreme the Deweyan idea according to which "every authentic new work of art is in some degree itself the birth of a new art" (Dewey [1934] 1987, 233).

The lack of instantly felt expressiveness in the physical objects of conceptual art remains a problem for some, and perhaps most, audiences. Arguably, the majority of people have become used to using their evolutionary background as well as their cultural upbringing—both embedded in the structure of a human being—to effortlessly initiate, carry, and direct the interaction with an art object towards an imaginative aesthetic experience of art. Hence the irresistible, but nonetheless enjoyable, ease with which an instantly expressive traditional masterpiece seizes an audience and evokes emotionally intense aesthetic scenarios in imagination seems unrivalled. In contrast, conceptual art relies on the more conscious and, thus, more laborious cognitive functions in the process of constituting a work of art as an experience. Consequently, conceptual art can appear unnecessarily cumbersome and arid in comparison.

## Constitution of an Expressive Conceptual Work of Art

The main difference between the conceptual and the more traditional approach to the constitution of art objects can be summarized as follows:

Within traditional artistic practices the material art objects take unprecedented forms marked by personal touch, but the mediated meanings—even as artistically transfigured—tend to be more or less familiar and widely shared; whereas in the conceptual orientation it is somewhat the opposite: the physical features of art objects are predominantly familiar to the point of being mundane, but their meanings are highly unusual and extremely contextual.

In general, conceptual art objects commonly provide ordinary cultural symbols or objects in various arrangements that the audience is expected to interpret primarily in conscious thought. For example, the conceptual artwork “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) (1991), by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (fig. 1), consists of two identical circular clocks, placed on a wall next to each other. Of course, in the context of an art gallery or museum the commonplace meaning of a clock does not apply anyway. Nevertheless, no unconscious sensory response, cultural convention, or combination thereof renders ordinary clocks expressive in the traditional sense.

Initially, the clocks show the same time. However, as batteries are exhausted the clocks inevitably fall out of synchronization—a key feature of the art object. Thus, a proper interaction with the art object of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) is exceptionally difficult, as it may require several encounters with the clocks at different times. Yet, even if audiences managed to “fully” interact with Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s art object over long periods of time, this alone would not assure a marked consistency in the ensuing experiences.

Unlike traditionally expressive art objects, an interpretation of conceptual art objects usually necessitates a considerable amount of contextual background knowledge. Not even an extensive general education ensures that an interaction with a conceptual art object is experienced in a way that resembles the experience of the artist. For instance, in the case of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) it is probable that without any audience knowledge about Gonzalez-Torres’s life, the experiences of the artist and the audience remain disparate. The experiences may align on the level of sense perception but not on the level of imaginative perception, where works of art are constituted as aesthetic scenarios. Without the latter, the communicative aspect of genuine art remains unrealized.

The bare cues embedded in the art object “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) do not make it instinctual or effortless to arrive at an experience that resembles in meaning and emotional tone the experience undergone by Gonzalez-Torres himself. In order for a member of an audience to direct her personal experience towards that of Gonzalez-Torres’s, it is necessary to resort to resources outside the physical art object and general psy-

chophysical preparedness. Learning that Gonzalez-Torres lost his partner Ross Laycock to AIDS, a condition that would later consume the artist as well, gives the dual composition of clocks a whole new meaning. With this additional information, which may require conscious effort to acquire, it is possible to interact with “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) in a more comprehensive manner. The extra information renders it possible for the minimal material cues to express the general idea of gradually diverging life paths as an emotionally intense imaginative scenario. Due to the fact that the main emphasis is on concepts of asynchrony and death *in general*, it is apparent that the artist is not looking for the sympathy of his audience—neither for himself nor for his social group. The intensity as well as the consequent emotional appreciation of Gonzalez-Torres’s work arise mainly from the significant implications of the presented scenario; these will, with time and in one way or another, come to touch the lives of the members of the audiences themselves.

Commonly, an increase in the uniformity of experiential backgrounds within a group results in improved possibilities for communication and mediation of ideas. Shared enjoyments, sufferings, consummations, and knowledge all increase the depth of meanings. This applies to culture in general and to a work of art in particular. Sometimes acquiring an adequate knowledge-base may require considerable personal effort. However, once a person obtains the necessary cognitive tools—even if only on a case by case basis—a whole new world opens up to experience. Hence, in addition to possibly satisfying existing needs of imaginative perception, conceptual art may also offer the possibility of discovering novel modes of perceiving imaginatively.

Within the realm of conceptual art, the conditions for inclusion into a social group capable of experiencing a conceptual art object as expressive are most peculiar. They are increasingly set by the artist and less by a combination of collective cultural structures and organic bodily functions. Of course, the latter two will always play a part, since no meaning—no matter how conventional, abstract, or idiosyncratic—is totally cut off from the composite substratum of nature and culture. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize the fact that conceptual works of art, as experiences, often incorporate situationally specific meanings constituted—and sometimes even embodied—by the artist.

In the context of conceptual art, the embodiment of meaning by the artist is sometimes quite literal but not necessarily overt, as in situated in the concrete art object. With regard to the latter, Dewey emphasizes the “local habitation” of common emotions and meanings in expressive artistic treatment (Dewey [1934] 1987, 96). In other words, according to Dewey,

in *traditional* aesthetic portrayal the manifested emotion is individualized (*ibid.*). An expression of grief, for example, is the grief of a distinct individual in a particular situation—not a direct general statement, as in the phrase “a person is sad” (*ibid.*).

On this account of local habitation, a traditional rendition of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) could have depicted actual people instead of generic clocks; perhaps Gonzalez-Torres himself and his companion in specific situations exhibiting explicit gestures and facial expressions. In an individualized form, the idea of slowly losing a companion would be effortlessly grasped with the resources most audiences already possess. However, in such a case, the work would not be as much about the concept of death, but more about “a death” or “the death of.”

Becoming consciously aware of mortality as a general aspect of human reality differs cognitively, experientially, and emotionally from perceiving a particular death of a particular being. Depending on the situation, the former can be more intimate: its implications pose a more direct—even if not necessarily more urgent—challenge to the continuity of one’s own life, the primal goal embedded in all organisms during natural evolution. On this account, it is possible to position the concept of death in thought as the main obstacle to be imaginatively overcome, as in a genuinely aesthetic experience of fine art.

Of course, death can be imaginatively overcome in a multitude of ways and in various contexts. One direct approach would be to entertain the decidedly hypothetical concept of immortality: a total solution to a most persistent of problems. The mere idea of personal existence beyond natural limits commonly generates high degrees of aesthetic quality in experience. Consequently, imaginative scenarios regarding afterlife carry the allure of most religions and certain technological sciences alike.

However, “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) does not rely upon the concept of immortality in restoring the mental balance disrupted by the notion of one’s own mortality. Rather, the work, as an experience, compels cherishing and valuing the finite moments—precisely because human lifetime is limited. In other words, death is not overcome in a literal sense; its daunting inevitability is counterbalanced by the emotionalized consummatory experience of finding value in temporally restricted existences, such as shared moments with loved ones. This key aspect of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) makes it especially suitable for the general role that Dewey sees fine art as possessing in human life. That is, the work renders everyday being more meaningful and enjoyable.

Furthermore, Gonzalez-Torres’s work performs this function of fine art in a way that aligns with the specific characteristics of a modern encl-

tured mind; it pushes the focus of awareness beyond the immediately present and tangibly distinct towards the temporally distant and spatially dispersed. Of course, the sciences, too, generalize and conceptualize from the cognitive scatter. But in science, the value of a concept is measured according to its degree of benefit for further inquiries and predictions. As aesthetic as the scientific problem–solution dynamic may be, in such instances the felt significance arises primarily from objectivity instead of intimacy. In contrast, it is precisely the latter that comprises the emotionalized value and meaningfulness of fine art—even if conceptual art, in particular, introduces this connection to innate human affairs through peculiar channels and, often, at a comparatively late phase in the process of constituting an experience of art. Nevertheless, as is the case with most artworks, even the conceptually oriented tend to provide value for individual and communal life rather than for any specific inquiry; conceptual artworks do not commonly intend to articulate unambiguous conclusive answers for the purpose of advancing a predetermined research. On this account, the conceptual approach to art appears to align with the sciences more in the means and less so in the ends. Hence, for the time being, the convergence between the subject-matters of art and science anticipated by Dewey remains only partial.

## Summary

Gonzalez-Torres's conceptual artwork "*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*) reshuffles the time-honored constitutive principles exhibited by traditional artworks. Firstly, the local habitation of emotionalized meanings is relocated from the art object to external contextual information—perhaps even to the personal life and character of the artist. Of course, universal human capacities are still needed, but their "coming together" in an experienced artistic whole is no longer primarily directed by the unique features of a concrete art object. Rather, the uniqueness of constitutive elements is now primarily a matter of an audience's preparation.

Secondly, the imaginative scenario, towards which the particularized supplementary information directs the audience's experience, is usually of the generalized type. In Gonzalez-Torres's work, the clocks dampen the particularity arising from the special contextual material used to interpret the art object. Knowledge about the artist's life does provide meaning to the relation of the clocks, but the clocks are not experienced as the life of the artist. The impersonality of the clocks compels audiences to empha-

size the concept of gradually growing asynchrony between individuals as a common feature of life in general, not just in the life of Gonzalez-Torres.

Overall, in the context of “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) the general concepts of asynchrony and death are unified into a coherent experiential whole. Even without highly individualized and unconsciously impactful features in the concrete structure of the art object, the emergent *total* scenario is imaginatively compelling and, once attentively constituted, perhaps even expressive. The relation of life paths, time, and the inevitable end are organized into a unified imaginative vision that vividly expresses certain significant aspects of the reality to which all living beings are subject to. That is to say, relations in Gonzalez-Torres’s work are not established only in the midst of conceptual matters, but also between the conceptual elements and the concrete life of a member of an audience. In short, despite the impersonal outer appearance of the art object, in its experiential entirety “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) can become a personally affecting consummatory whole—just as can any genuine work of art.

## Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate one possible way that conceptual artworks can be explained within the framework of John Dewey’s pragmatist theory of art. This study is not an all-encompassing or exhaustive analysis of conceptual art as a whole. Works, artists, and audiences that defy the approach I outline in this paper do exist. Overall, the above examination of conceptual art relates primarily to a key condition of fine art defined by Dewey. According to him, “[t]he abiding struggle of art is thus to convert materials that are stammering or dumb in ordinary experience into eloquent media” (Dewey [1934] 1987, 233).

Furthermore, Dewey maintains that it is possible to approach this transformation of materials with a distinctly conscious mindset. That is to say, artistic processes may exhibit a “deliberate awareness,” which contrasts with the more intuitive method of “sympathetic vibration” (Dewey [1925] 1981, 293). In this paper I have highlighted both modes, but prioritized the former, as conceptual art often tends to be “analytic,” that is, to rely on “deliberate awareness.” Considering emphatically analytic art products, Dewey notes that “[a]t their worst, these products are ‘scientific’ rather than artistic; technical exercises, sterile and of a new kind of pedantry” (*ibid.*). With this statement in mind, I present means for overcoming such pitfalls in the context of conceptual art. In the end, the pragmatist approach to conceptual art that I put forward establishes a path

towards the realization of the aesthetic potential of these analytically constituted art productions. As Dewey also proclaims: “At their best, they assist in ushering in new modes of art and by education of the organs of perception in new modes of consummatory objects; they enlarge and enrich the world of human vision” (*ibid.*).

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