

Alexi Kukuljevic\*

## Absense, or the Extimate Place of Art

### Keywords

art, aesthetics, sense, nonsense, stupidity, extimacy, Heidegger, Lacan, Balzac

### Abstract

In order to think Art in its difference from the arts, I argue, requires that we take seriously its lack of sense. This lack is symptomatic of a historical rupture with the sense of art as *technē* (know-how), a sense that remains at play when one speaks of the arts. However, if art is not an art, then what is it? In this essay, I argue that art is a thing that makes sense absent. To specify art's absent sense, its absense, requires both a historical analysis of art's rupture with *technē* and the mastery it implies, and an ontological determination of the manner in which it makes of this loss a thing that serves to dumbfound. Art is thus inseparable from stupidity. Through an engagement with the work of Aristotle and Heidegger, Bataille and Balzac, Baudelaire, and Lacan, I suggest that art marks the extimate place of absense.

## Absense ali ekstimno mesto umetnosti

### Ključne besede

umetnost, estetika, smisel, nesmisel, neumnost, ekstimnost, Heidegger, Lacan, Balzac

### Povzetek

Menim, da je za to, da bi mislili Umetnost v njeni razliki od umetnosti (množina), treba resno jemati njen manko smisla. Ta manko je simptomatičen za zgodovinski prelom s smislom umetnosti kot *technē* (*know-how*), ki ostaja dejaven, ko govorimo o umetnostih. Če pa umetnost ni (neka) umetnost, kaj potem sploh je? V tem eseju trdim, da je umetnost tisto, kar povzroči odsotnost smisla. Da bi opredelili odsotnost smisla (*absent sense*) umetnosti, njeno odsotnost (*absense*), sta potrebni tako zgodovinska analiza preki-

\* Universität für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna, Austria  
alex.kukuljevic@uni-ak.ac.at

nitve umetnosti s *technē* in obvladovanjem, ki ga ta implicira, kot tudi ontološka določitev načina, kako iz te izgube naredi stvar, ki služi poneumljenju. Umetnost je torej neločljivo povezana z neumnostjo. S spoprijemanjem z deli Aristotela in Heideggerja, Batailla in Balzaca, Baudelaira in Lacana zagovarjam tezo, da umetnost zaznamuje ekstimno mesto odsotnosti smisla (*absense*).



“Absense” is a funny word, funny looking at least. Strictly speaking, it is not a word at all. If spoken, it loses this funny quality, which becomes legible only when written down. When read, it pits the eye that stumbles over its presence against the ear that leaps with expectation towards a sense. One does not hear the “s” in “absense”; one hears a “c,” as in “absence.” Moreover, one has to be reminded that the “c” here is absent. One would not be remiss to think it a typo, for the understanding has a powerful undertow, but I assure you it is not. It may have been, but once it catches the eye with its hook, a certain sense accrues to this absence. So, one ought to see the “s” in “absense” not merely as an “s” but as a “c” with a hook. It is an “s” that is not sure of its place, of its identity. Is it merely posing as a “c”? It is not exactly an “s” but more like the excrescence of the “c.”

This excrescence marks something that is missing. It is in between sense, which is to say in between two senses of “sense”: between what can be sensed (the *aestheton*) and the sense of sense. When something makes sense, when it adds up (to think in terms dollars and cents), we do not question its meaning. We take it for granted. The sense of what is missing when the “s” is in the place of the “c” is in fact a missing sense. Absenssse—to exaggerate the failure, to make of it a caricature—here serves to name, and thus amplify, an absent sense. To insist on the “s” is to stress that the sense of “absence” is itself absent. It presents to us an absence that cannot be made sense of. This is what art does: it makes sense absent. To cultivate a relation to this absence is what I have called the art of living absently.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Alexi Kukuljevic, *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

If this is indeed the case—if art makes absence—then art is itself aptly named. For it is altogether difficult to locate the sense of art. Although the institution(s) of art (the system of galleries, museums, schools, etc.) are there to remind us that the thing itself exists and to ensure if not to engender a belief in its referent, the sense of the word is by no means self-evident.<sup>2</sup> Art is a noun that does not at all build the kind of confidence in its referent that we normally expect from a noun. Put bluntly, the sense of art itself seems to be absent. This absence doubtless has something to do with a missing “s.” If art named the set of all the arts, or even a definitive subset of the arts—as for a time one still in the habit of speaking of the fine arts could believe—then art would not be lacking sense. One could delimit its extension, demarcate its limits, in short, supply an intuition for its concept. This remains possible when we speak of the arts in the plural. However, art does not designate a general class. Rather, it designates a subset of the arts that excepts itself from their determination. This exception has itself become a commonplace. We speak of the history of art, debating perhaps its beginning and what ought or not to be included. Ought we to include the shell doodles of *Homo erectus* some 500,000 years ago? Yet, the domain or field that is covered by art is not identical with the history of arts, which is synonymous with a history of technics.

Art is both more and less abstract than a conventionally functioning noun. On the one hand, it is akin to a proper name, for it serves to differentiate art from all the other arts, serving to designate something that is “singular and without any qualifiers.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, on the other hand, unlike proper names it does not serve to specifically identify what it names. The name itself seems to conceal rather than to reveal an identity as if rendering itself, that which it names, indiscernible. It sets apart a singularity whose very singularity lies in being unnamable. Akin perhaps to Odysseus’s cunning escape from Polyphemus, where the very utterance of the name “Nobody” serves as Odysseus’s disguise, the evasiveness of the proper name “art” points to something improper, an unseemly substance.

<sup>2</sup> Let us recall the famous opening of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 1.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow this formulation from Jacques Rancière: “A ‘history of art’ assumes that art exists in the singular and without any qualifiers.” *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of the Arts*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), 12.

It serves to identify that which lacks an identity. Art's autonomy consigns it to a radical heteronomy that is altogether other than the heteronomy of the arts. Art is extimate to the arts. As such, art locates something that is extimate to sense as such: the presence of an absence, the protuberance of the void. As a result of its extimate character, its exceptionality entails that it can be in principle confused with the commonplace.

The historian of art may try to dispel the ontological and epistemological conundrum presented by the name by claiming that art itself does not exist. Ernst Gombrich can claim, "There is no art; there are only artists," and Werner Hofmann may assert that, "There is no art, only arts!"<sup>4</sup> However, these efforts to maintain the foundation of a discipline's identity from the indiscernibility of its object fail to grasp that artistic practices do not only produce but are produced as the ongoing attempt to come to terms with art's singular abstraction. It is worth recalling that art as a term to designate a "specialized meaning" in "arts" and "artist" only emerges in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Before this emergence, it would not have been possible to speak of a history of art or to undertake a philosophy of art. Neither Plato nor Aristotle had any notion of art. Rather, they conceived of *mimetikē* (the art of imitating or representing) as a kind of *technē* (skill, know-how). The retroactive reconfiguration of this field that allows one to speak of cave paintings, Greek tragedies, and altar pieces as art is the result of an effort in principle infinite to specify the singular abstraction of art, to give

<sup>4</sup> As cited by Helmut Draxler, *Gefährliche Substanzen: Zum Verhältnis von Kritik und Kunst* (Berlin: b\_books, 2007), 35.

<sup>5</sup> See Raymond Williams's entry "Art," in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9. Art itself presumes the institutionalization of what Paul Oskar Kristeller refers to as the modern system of the arts or what is more generally referred to as the fine arts, which chiefly comprises the five arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry (and more loosely, the arts of gardening, the decorative arts, drama and dance, opera, and prose literature). As he argues in a magisterial two-part work of intellectual history, the emergence of "this system of five major arts, which underlies all modern aesthetics and which is so familiar to us all"—art *conceived* as a separate sphere of culture autonomous from religion, science, craft, and other practical pursuits such as entrepreneurship, which thus taken for granted by both post-Kantian aesthetics and critics of aesthetics—"is of comparatively recent origin and did not assume and did not assume definite shape before the eighteenth century, although it has many ingredients that go back to classical, medieval, and Renaissance thought." Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (October 1951): 498, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707484>.

it sense. Both the history of art and its theory (the emergence of a philosophy of art and the discourse of aesthetics) emerge as efforts to make sense of this abstraction. Most notably, for Hegel, the very revelation of this abstraction, of art's autonomy, exposes the essence of art as "a self-annihilating nothing" (*ein Nichtiges, ein sich Vernichtendes*).<sup>6</sup> Art embodies the paradoxical freedom of the suicide where absolute freedom is expressed through its irreparable abolition.

Art purports to be something—a thing that artists make, a thing inscribed in works of art—but as soon as one attempts to identify or isolate the ground of this distinction between art and the arts, one is at a loss. Modernism is certainly the most consequential attempt to ground art in and through its relation to the arts. The problem of art's autonomy from the arts becomes a problem of the autonomy of each of the arts. The problem of art as such is thus replaced with the problem of each specific art's relation to itself. And this relation itself becomes the criterion or measure that allows one at once to determine the difference between the many arts and reinstall a hierarchy within each specific art. The autonomy of art from the arts is here thought as the autonomy of each art with respect to itself, that is, the laws governing its own practice. Yet, the theory requires that a nontechnical determination of *technē* is reintroduced, for the difference between the artist (*qua* fine artist) and the artist (*qua* craftsman) is maintained and asserted as a difference in kind, but the difference in their "know-how" can only be construed as a difference in degree (the craftsman remains absorbed in the object while the artist is concerned with mediatic conditions that make it possible). Through this sleight-of-hand modernism succeeds in bestowing meaning or sense on art, but at the cost of enforcing exclusions that become increasingly ridiculous, leading to the implosion of this mode of conceptualisation and periodisation. The anachronistic return of *technē* is both understandable and futile since it is perhaps the only means not of saving (since that is impossible) but of attempting to save art from absence.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Knox translates this phrase as "null in its self-destruction." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1:67. I am following the translation of this phrase suggested by Georgia Albert in her translation of Giorgio Agamben's *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> As should become clear shortly in the paper, *technē* as it is thought by either Plato or Aristotle has nothing to do with "media" or its "formal" conditions. Poetics, for Aristotle, is not concerned with the medium of poetry or theater, let alone the medium of the word, of language. The ground of *poetikē* is the story (*mythos*). The poem is most fundamentally

Rather than seeking to restore meaning to art, it is preferable to acknowledge that its relation to the arts is groundless. One encounters this groundlessness, according to Martin Heidegger, in the circularity of its definition: an artist is one who makes a work of art, but a work of art is something made by an artist. To speak of artists presupposes artworks and to speak of artworks presupposes artists. Both the identity of the artist and that of the work of art presume a relation to art.<sup>8</sup> “Art—this is nothing more than a word to which nothing actual any longer corresponds.”<sup>9</sup> If art is not merely a work of *an* art (the work of an artisan), then the work of art in itself—pure art, as Gustave Flaubert formulates it—is positioned in relation to its absent sense. Art no longer corresponds to anything, because it names a vacancy. This vacancy can of course always be filled by a relation to the arts, for art is not *not an art*, but this relation is not determinative. Art is indifferent to its being an art precisely because it is not determined by *technē*.

If art is not the product of a kind of making, there is no criterion, measure, or ground to differentiate it from what it is not. It remains, of course, for the most part, something made, but most decisively, it need not be. It can, in short, be readymade. For the fact of its having been made no longer functions as a criterion for it being a work of art. As Flaubert famously puts it in a letter to Louise Colet, “Masterworks are stupid [*bêtes*].—They have the placid faces of the

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the representation (*mimesis*) of a story. The art of poetry is differentiated from other arts by means of its end (*telos*). Saddle-making and poetry do not differ in essence, since they are both arts, but in their respective ends. One makes saddles, the other makes stories. To make *technē* a mediatic concern entails a radical transformation of how representation itself is conceived. In other words, to speak of medium with respect to Aristotle’s *Poetics* would entail that the story is itself the medium of poetry. The very thing that would have to be the medium for Aristotle cannot be mediatic.

<sup>8</sup> It is also worth noting that the term “artist,” from *artista*, first coined in the Middle Ages, initially referred to craftsmen (artisans) and students of the liberal arts. See Kristeller, “Modern System of the Arts,” 508.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 1993), 143. Heidegger here recasts the problem that Hegel identifies at the outset of his lectures on *Aesthetics*: “In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.” Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1:11.

very products of nature, like big animals and mountains.”<sup>10</sup> A work of art is only when it is not *what* it is; namely, when it is something made in conformity with a specific end and for a specific reason; crucially, it is this “not” which makes it appear dumb like nature.<sup>11</sup> Stupidity (*bêtise*) connotes here something that is irresponsive, placid, in the sense of not being easily disturbed, unaffected. Masterpieces (*les chefs-d’oeuvres*) like large animals are not quick to react, unperturbed like a mountain, deadpan. Pure art and the works that most closely incarnate it do not put on a display of intelligence, but, on the contrary, assume its failing. They are closed upon themselves and idiotic.

Immanuel Kant says something strangely similar in *The Critique of Judgment* when he shifts his consideration from aesthetic judgment to the definition of beautiful art (*schöne Kunst*). Although Kant distinguishes “art as such” (*Kunst überhaupt*) from nature as a kind of making or doing (*facere*) grounded in freedom, he writes, “By right, only production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art.”<sup>12</sup> When it comes to defining beautiful art, beauty itself becomes a sign of an exception to this rule: “Beautiful art is an art to the extent that it seems at the same time to be nature.”<sup>13</sup> Beautiful art embodies a fundamental contradiction. Beautiful art is an art that insofar as it is beautiful does not appear to be an effect of an art. Although we cannot confuse art and nature (we must remain “aware of it as art”), art must nevertheless assume a relation to that which it is not—it must “look to us like nature.” Thus, even though an artwork is “certainly intentional,” as Kant puts it, in order for beautiful art to be differentiated from mechanical art, it “must nevertheless not seem intentional, i.e., beautiful art must be regarded

<sup>10</sup> Gustave Flaubert to Louise Colet, June 27, 1852, in *Correspondance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973–2007), 2:119; quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Commenting on Flaubert’s claim, Jacques Rancière writes: “When Flaubert says that masterpieces are stupid, he defines a different kind of stupidity, which is the fact of being put forward, just like that, without meaning anything. This can end in a radical decision: since the meaning is stupid, you destroy all that produces a meaning. Consequently, you will put stupidity in art, namely, the decision not to produce meaning, interpretation, any effect of interpretation, against stupidity in the sense of a consensus.” Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 98.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 182, § 43.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, 185, § 45.

as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art.”<sup>14</sup> The artwork cannot be conceived as conforming to an intention, for if it did exhibit such conformity, it would be a determinate object that “would please only through concepts.” And although an artwork, according to Kant, has to accord with rules, this accord cannot be merely “academic”; the accord must be “exacting” (*Pünktlichkeit*) without being “painstaking” (*Peinlichkeit*).<sup>15</sup> In order to appear as art, an artwork cannot appear to be the work of an art but appear like a product of nature.

Although Kant attempts to resolve the problem of this necessary gap in intention by introducing the figure of the genius whose transgressive drives must be tamed by the judgment of a true aesthete, as Flaubert perceives, as soon as one admits such a gap there is no criterion to distinguish the genius from the fool. Idiocy rules the day because art is only art if it fails to conform to expectation. Art cannot accord with what we expect from it. It must lack determination. It must dumbfound. Flaubert never tires of railing against such expectations.

I challenge any dramatist to have the audacity to put on stage of popular theatre a worker who is a thief. No thank you, the worker has to be an honest fellow, and the gentleman is always a scoundrel. Just as at the Théâtre Français the girls on stage are always pure, because the mummies take their daughters there. I therefore believe in the truth of this axiom: people love falsehood; falsehood all through the day and dreams all through the night, such is human nature.<sup>16</sup>

If human nature inculcates in the subject an ineluctable love of falsehood, pure art, according to Flaubert, serves to confound human nature. Although Kant would in no way suggest that the work of genius is tantamount to work of the most profound stupidity, he would have to admit that stupidity is the danger that genius incurs precisely in abandoning *technē* as a criterion for art.

The sense of art, insofar as it is indexed to the arts, remains tethered to the Greek sense of art: *technē*. It is a know-how, a skill that enables one to make or produce something. All works of art, in this sense, from tables and chairs to sculptures,

<sup>14</sup> Kant, 186, § 45.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, 186, § 45; translation modified.

<sup>16</sup> Gustave Flaubert, “Eleven Letters,” trans. Geoffrey Wall, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1996): 235.



health, or stories are not the creations of a particular artisan as much as the result of a conformity to the ends of a given art. A particular doctor only produces health by conforming to the art of medicine. Thus, if I am cured by a doctor of an ailment, I do not attribute the cure to the particularities of the doctor but to her capacity with respect to her know-how. Likewise, the art of poetry (*poētikē*) produces a poem (*poiēma*) through making an imitation or representation (*mimēsis*) of a story (*mythos*). The beauty of a story, according to Aristotle, thus depends on the organization of its plot (*logos*) and the propriety of its magnitude. It is thus the story and the kinds of people that the story is about (whether of high or low moral stature) that in turn determines the kind of story it is (its genre) and the kinds of affects and feelings appropriate to it (e.g., pity and fear in the case of tragedy). Insofar as the work of art is thought in relation to *technē*, it is not the cause of itself; it is not autonomous (to use an anachronistic term). Only nature (*physis*) is autonomous, which is to say, its source (*aitia*) or origin (*archē*) is internal to it.<sup>17</sup> All products of *technē*, on the other hand, have their source (*archē*) external to them: “The source is in the one who makes it and not in the thing that is made.”<sup>18</sup> As Aristotle clarifies, this entails that the sculpture, for example, lies in the skilled know-how of the sculptor (that is, in the art of sculpting) and not what is only incidental to that art: namely, the individual sculptor, Polyceitus: “It is incidental to the sculptor to be Polyceitus.”<sup>19</sup> Just as ethics, for Aristotle, is the art of building character, poetics is the art of storytelling. Each of these arts have a distinctive virtue that the artist strives to master and whose excellence can be judged. Each art has its own “exertion of mastery.”<sup>20</sup> One can thus compete in the art of storytelling, just as one can compete in sports, because what is at issue is the *state of the art*, the level of mastery being exerted over those it affects or those it aims to move.

<sup>17</sup> See Aristotle, *Physics: A Guided Study*, trans. Joe Sachs (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), bk. II, chap. 1. Aristotle states clearly that nothing produced by means of art (*technē*) has “the source of its making” in itself.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Indianapolis: Focus, 2002), 1140a12.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 195a30.

<sup>20</sup> The phrase is from Plato, “Gorgias,” in Plato and Aristotle, *Gorgias and Rhetoric*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus, 2009), 450c–451a. Gorgias defines rhetoric as “the action and exertion of mastery by means of speech.” It is important to note that Socrates denies that rhetoric itself is an art, which is to say, a true art. He thinks that the definition itself is too broad, since arithmetic, for example, also exerts mastery by means of speech. Importantly for what I am here claiming, the assumption that *technē* is an exertion of mastery is not itself questioned.

Art (*technē*) is itself an exertion of mastery. Mastery implies hierarchy, but it does not entail domination. The true master does not have to appeal to brute force but skill, know-how. Art is then precisely something that can be taught and learned. Though art is distinct from nature, it is not opposed to nature. On the contrary, an art has to accord with nature as such and as a whole, and what it produces is not nature but this accord. Aristotle will thus claim that “imitating is in accord with our nature” and that the sign of this accord lies in the pleasure that we take in representation: “We delight in contemplating the most accurately made images of the very things that are painful for us to see, such as the forms of the most contemptible insects and of dead bodies.”<sup>21</sup> Thus poetry as the art of imitation exhibits mastery only in being in accord with nature. Yet, this accord is produced if the imitation represents the sorts of things that a certain kind of person says and does “as the result of what is likely or necessary.”<sup>22</sup> A likely or necessary sequence of events is a sign that the story is in accordance with natural causality. The believable is thus privileged over the possible: “With a view to the poetry, an impossible thing that is believable is preferable to an unbelievable thing that is possible.”<sup>23</sup> Aristotle goes on to claim that poetry, insofar as it is *the* art of imitation, is originally divided according to the “character” of the poet: “And the making of poetry split apart in accordance with their own characters, for the more dignified poets imitated beautiful actions and people of the sort who perform them, while the less worthy sort imitated actions of low people, first making abusive poems just as the others made hymns and praises.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the imitation has to accord with the nature of those being represented. Mastery is ultimately the art of knowing one’s place, of knowing how to shape and control the effects of one’s speech and how to calibrate one’s mode of address. Above all, it is a matter of knowing the limits of propriety. However, the identification of art and nature touched upon above displaces this notion, for art is like nature only insofar as it knows no propriety. Stupidity could thus be defined as the meeting point of intelligence and idiocy.

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The fool is the one who fails to recognize one’s place, and thus by extension the propriety of place. Propriety of place is akin to what Georges Bataille in *Manet*

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus, 2006), 1448b9–12.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, 1451b9–10.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, 1461b11–13.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, 1448b25–28.

calls rhetoric. Rhetoric consists of a “vast didactic structure” in which representation serves to institute the place of the viewing subject, enabling them to locate themselves within a hierarchical order, such that the subject will accord with expectation. Bataille illustrates this with reference to Antonin Proust’s characterization of Manet’s frustration with the ridiculous heroic poses that his models would *naturally* adopt, preferring his models to stand naturally as they would standing in line at the grocer’s.<sup>25</sup> The break with representation is a break with the rhetoric of prescribed attitudes, poses that institute a set of expectations concerning how a subject ought to be presented and establish an accordance between viewer and the work. Bataille notes this shift in Manet’s *The Old Musician* (1862), where a certain “ungainliness” is opposed to theatrical staging. Rather than “a carefully arranged pose,” Manet paints “a natural disorder arrived at by chance.”<sup>26</sup> As Bataille suggests, Manet’s realism is not opposed to the autonomy of art itself but is the very means through which representation is itself shattered.<sup>27</sup> The conquest of autonomy passes by way of realism.<sup>28</sup> The identification of art with nature serves to displace the implied mastery of artistic handling by displacing the sense of the subject or what Bataille refers to as the implied text that renders the painting legible *as a painting*. Manet’s destruction of the subject, as Bataille puts it, proceeds by obliterating the text that serves to place the figure within a legible scene. Nature here marks an indifference of sub-

<sup>25</sup> If I insist here on the repetition of the adverb “naturally,” it is to emphasize how “according to nature” can assume diametrically opposed senses, and it is this tension between these two senses that I have been trying to highlight by contrasting the place of “nature” in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the place of nature in Kant, Flaubert, and now Manet.

<sup>26</sup> Georges Bataille, *Manet: Biographical and Critical Study*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons (Ohio: Skira, 1955), 38.

<sup>27</sup> Bataille identifies the autonomy of art with the emergence of art in general: “The various kinds of painting that have arisen since Manet’s time represent the varied possibilities of painting in this new realm we have entered, where silence reigns profoundly and art is the supreme value—art *in general*, which means man as an individual, self-sustaining, detached from any collective enterprise or prescribed system (and also from individualism). Here the work of art takes the place of everything that in the past—even in the remotest past—was sacred and majestic.” Bataille, 64. Jacques Rancière has emphasized, particularly in his treatment of Flaubert, that realism far from being opposed to autonomy is the condition of its emergence.

<sup>28</sup> Thus, although Bataille aligns Manet with the emergence of painting’s autonomy, he gives the modernist interpretation of this notion a violent twist. See Yve-Alain Bois’s essay “The Use Value of Formless,” in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, ed. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997) 13–40. This is a point that T. J. Clark also acknowledges as Bois points out in *Formless*, 256n5.

ject matter, a leveling of its order that marks a disjunction between the appearance and its form. According to Bataille, even death, such as in *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* (1867), which would seem to preclude “an indifferent treatment” and to be “charged with meaning” is approached by Manet “with an almost callous indifference that the spectator, surprisingly enough, shares to the full.” He continues,

*Maximilian* reminds us of a tooth deadened by Novocain; we get the impression of an all-engulfing numbness, as if a skillful practitioner had radically cured painting of a centuries-old ailment: chronic eloquence. Manet posed some of his models in the attitude of dying, some in the attitude of killing, but all more or less casually, as if they were about to “buy a bunch of radishes.”<sup>29</sup>

Bataille stresses that the painting fails to meet with expectation. Given the subject of the painting, one expects an “emotional reaction,” but this is disappointed. Rather, this disappointed expectation leaves behind “the curious impression of an absence.”<sup>30</sup> This failure is not a deficit but a gain that positions the painting within a “imponderable plenitude,” a vast lack of significance.

With *Olympia* this is pushed to an extreme. Manet dislodges the subject, that is, the figure, from a ground that would assign it meaning. Manet does not locate “his subject *anywhere*, neither in the drab world of naturalistic prose nor in that, typified by Couture, of absurd academic fictions.”<sup>31</sup> She of course remains a figure on a ground, but this relationship is itself stripped of the accord that enable’s a viewer to make sense of her place. She is presented as a mere thing, something simply there, a mute obstacle: a presence that presents an absence, the place of signification’s lack. Bataille writes,

In her provocative literalness she is nothing. Her real nudity (not merely that of her body) is the silence that emanates from her, like that from a sunken ship. All we have is the “sacred horror” of her presence—presence whose sheer simplicity is tantamount to absence.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Bataille, *Manet*, 52.

<sup>30</sup> Bataille, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Bataille, 67.

<sup>32</sup> Bataille, 67.

It is her silence, this quality of indifference, of withdrawal that Bataille likens to a downed ship, which serves to stupefy. Bataille is of course aware that the very scandal of her presence has now in part served to ensure its pride of place in the Louvre. However, this misses the point. For there is no art that is beyond all such recuperation. Bataille's simile is here apt. Like the hole in a hull of a ship, *Olympia's* entry into the museum does not diminish but instead seals her fate of never being just a painting, but a painting that serves to exemplify a paradigmatic instance of Art. What secures this place is not its masterly execution (what Bataille refers to as "eloquence") but an enunciation that lisps, an articulation that stutters, things that impress upon sense, an essential incongruity between what is shown and how it is shown, making a place for the implacable.<sup>33</sup>

Art as the null-occupant of this place emerges as an effect of a transformation in the structure of mastery in which the products of art are subordinated to the calculated effects one expects them to produce. Art's loss of an "s" appears like a symptom. It is an absence that marks an excess (something that exceeds the determinations of mastery and thus whose effects are difficult if not at times impossible to predict or contain). The appearance of art serves to split the history of the arts in two. This split does not pass between the liberal arts and the fine arts but rather between the arts and art. Art names the ongoing appropriation of this rupture or split itself. Since art both is and is not an art as well as the separation of an art from a position of mastery, not only everything that is made but also that which is unmade can be a work of art (the non-site for Robert Smithson; the refusal to make in Lee Lozano's *Dropout Piece*; or the empty exhibition in Laurie Parsons's *578 Broadway, 11th Floor 1990* at Lorence Monk Gallery, New York). Art as such, and the history of art, is the ongoing effort (perhaps one can say drive) to exhibit the effects of its absent sense. The history of avant-garde

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<sup>33</sup> Bataille's critique of Valéry's interpretation of *Olympia* is decisive in this regard. Valéry interprets the painting as an elevation of the ignoble, where a prostitute "whose status requires guileless ignorance of all decency" become a "bestial vestal dedicated to absolute nakedness." Bataille, 66. Yet, for Bataille, Manet does not maintain the form of the majestic, of grandeur, but precisely challenges this very form, this very rhetoric: "[*Olympia*] is the negation of mythological Olympus and everything it stood for." Bataille, 71. *Olympia* does not simply invert a meaning but challenges sense bestowal as such. Bois puts it as follows, "If the *Olympia* caused a scandal, Bataille argues, it was because by means of it Manet refused the various ideological and formal codes regulating the depiction of the nude, whether erotic, mythological, or even realistic (Courbet didn't like it)." Bois, "Use Value of Formless," 15.

practice is a history that attends to its most flamboyant effects. The effects of this history are perhaps less visible if one attends only to the “shock of the new.” More significant in my view is the effect of stupefaction that the appearance of art can produce.

So the conjunction of art and absense should make us think of the missing “s” in “art” and the missing “c” in “absense.” To hear “art,” one should sense what this lack of an “s” here signifies—namely, that art is not one of the arts. And this negation, this “not,” should make us hesitate over the sense of its singularity. A work of art that is not the mere result of the work of an art is neither simply a thing of use (a piece of equipment) nor is it merely a commodity (an exchange value), but it is also not something natural (“it does not have the character of having taken shape by itself like the granite boulder”).<sup>34</sup> Heidegger resists identifying this thing, this interstice between the natural and the social as a mere thing. To arrive at a mere thing through the process of subtraction determines the thing, its “thing-being,” as a “left-over.” Heidegger adds that “this remnant is not actually defined in its ontological character. It remains doubtful whether the thingly character comes to view at all in the process of stripping off everything equipmental.”<sup>35</sup> To think the ontological character of the work of art is to think the being of this leftover. I propose that we dwell on this moment that Heidegger would not like us to dwell on. In the leftover we are faced with a mere thing, a dumb thing, which is to say, something that dumbfounds.

In English one can speak of being “dumbfounded.” When one is dumbfounded, one finds oneself in an encounter with a demand for which there is no response. As one of its first appearances in the English language attests to in Thomas Urquhart’s translation of Rabelais, to dumbfound is an embarrassment of the head: “I beseech you never dum-found or Embarrass your Head with these idle Conceits.” Or as another Thomas puts it, Thomas Otway, in *The Souldiers Fortune*, “He has but one eye, and we are on his blind side; I’ll dumb-found him. (Strikes him on the shoulder.)” To be dumbfounded is to encounter something unexpected, unforeseen, and thus something that cannot be avoided, resolved, or circumnavigated. “I cannot wriggle out of it; I am dumbfounded,” as Charles

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<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” 154.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, 156.

Darwin puts it.<sup>36</sup> In short, one finds oneself dumb, which is to say, unable to speak.<sup>37</sup> What is dumbfounding founds the subject in dumbness, in silence. One is at a loss for words, trapped somewhere between being stunned and astonished, between stupidity and wonder. Jacques Lacan introduces the relation to the thing, “the-beyond-of-the-signified,” as a matter of dumbness. “The things in question are things insofar as they are dumb [. . .]. And dumb things are not exactly the same as things which have no relationship to words.”<sup>38</sup> Lacan introduces here, as a case in point, the face of Harpo Marx:

Is there anything that poses a question which is more present, more pressing, more absorbing, more disruptive, more nauseating, more calculated to thrust everything that takes place before us into the abyss or void than that face of Harpo Marx, that face with its smile which leaves us unclear as to whether it signifies the most extreme perversity or complete simplicity? This dumb man alone is sufficient to sustain the atmosphere of doubt and of radical annihilation which is the stuff of the Marx brothers’ extraordinary farce and the uninterrupted play of “jokes” that makes their activity so valuable.<sup>39</sup>

Dumbness connotes a reduction to the irreducible. A reduction, in other words, not to nothingness but to a nothing that cannot be made to mean anything, not even nothingness. It marks the muteness of language, that which cannot be signified within language, which is to say, extimate to language. A thing is dumb because it marks the place of a nothing that cannot be made to signify something. A thing because it evades the opposition between something and nothing (nothingness) cannot be reached by means of a negation. A nothing marks the advent of absence.

<sup>36</sup> For these references, see “Dumbfound” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>37</sup> One might here also refer to Plato’s treatment of *aporia* in the *Meno* where Socrates is jokingly likened to a torpedo-fish or sting-ray (*narkē*) for his capacity to numb (*narkan*) both soul and mouth. See Plato, *Meno*, trans. George Berns and Laurence Anastaplo (Newburyport: Focus, 2004), 79e–80b. I would like to thank Surti Singh for reminding me of this passage.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 55.

<sup>39</sup> Lacan, 55.

In the essay, “Salon of 1846,” Charles Baudelaire reminds us of what is at stake in the attribution of this singularly abstract term, “art,” by returning to the scene in 1822 when Delacroix’s *The Barque of Dante* was first exhibited.

To get a good idea of the deep turmoil that the picture *Dante et Virgile* must have caused in the minds of the people at the time, the astonishment, the stupefaction, the anger, the chorus of insults, the enthusiasm, the guffaws of insolent laughter that greeted this fine picture, signal if ever there was one of a revolution, it must be remembered that in the studio of M. Guérin, a man of great talent, but a despot and narrow like his master David, there was only a handful of outcasts who bothered about the forgotten old masters and who dared, albeit timidly, to conspire under the aegis of Raphael and Michelangelo. There was as yet no question of Rubens.<sup>40</sup>

For Baudelaire, Delacroix’s originality consists in his radically different relation to mastery. It is not a matter of a rupture with tradition but how Delacroix relates to the form of its transmission. Raphael and Michelangelo become models not of the pedantry of a despotic master (M. Guérin) but of artists pursuing art as the pursuit of truth. It is this relation to art that serves, according to Baudelaire, to either astonish or stupefy. It stupefies the pedants, because Raphael is not summoned for the purposes of being a model of classicism. It is worth recalling, as Rancière reminds us:

In the prize list of painters compiled by Roger de Piles in 1708, he was the undisputed master in the fields of drawing and expression, equaled only by Guérchin and Rubens in composition. Colour alone, of which Titian and the Venetians were the recognized masters, constituted his weak point. But even this weakness contributed to his supremacy for all those who considered drawing the directing principle of the art of painting, and colour its simple servant.<sup>41</sup>

Now compare this understanding of Raphael to that of Frenhofer’s ecstatic praise for the painter in Honoré de Balzac’s *The Unknown Masterpiece*:

<sup>40</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846,” in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1972), 61.

<sup>41</sup> Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 22.



His supremacy's due to that intimate sense which apparently seeks to break Form. In Raphael's figures, Form is what it is in all of us: an intermediary for the communication of ideas and sensations, a vast poetry! Each figure is a world, a portrait whose model has appeared in a sublime vision, colored by light, drawn by an inner voice, examined by a celestial hand which has revealed the sources of expression in an entire existence. You people make lovely gowns of flesh for your women, elegant draperies of hair, but where's the blood which creates peace or passion, which causes particular effects? Your saint's a brunette, yet this, my poor Porbus, this belongs to a blonde! And so your figures are tinted phantoms you parade before our eyes, and you call that painting, you call that art!<sup>42</sup>

If Delacroix's canvas, according to Baudelaire, can induce insult and anger, even "guffaws of insulant laughter," it is because it calls into question hierarchies of painting that an educated public believed they had every right to expect, for by recognizing these hierarchies they would themselves in turn be recognized, confirmed in and by their judgment. From this perspective, Delacroix's painting is not a painting but a mere caricature of a painting, or what Balzac in *The Unknown Masterpiece* describes as a "*prétendu tableau*." Richard Howard translates this an "imagined picture," but it has the sense of the supposed, alleged, or, perhaps, feigned.

Balzac publishes *The Unknown Masterpiece* (*Chef d'oeuvre inconnu*) in the periodical *L'Artiste* in 1831, and he doubtless has Delacroix (and perhaps also Ingres) in mind. Set in the seventeenth century, the central figure, the painter Frenhofer, provides "a consummate image of the artist's nature," as an incarnation of Romantic genius: "everything about this old man transcended the limits of human nature."<sup>43</sup> Frenhofer is depicted quite precisely as an artist and not a mere painter. A mere painter, according to Frenhofer, remains "satisfied" with the appearances of things. An artist, such as Raphael, on the contrary, "is never deceived by all those subterfuges, he perseveres until nature's forced to show herself stark naked, in her true spirit."<sup>44</sup> The artist is one who not only paints ("Many painters succeed instinctively, without ever knowing this theme of art.")<sup>45</sup> but

<sup>42</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), 15.

<sup>43</sup> Balzac, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Balzac, 14–15.

<sup>45</sup> Balzac, 14.

philosophizes, animated by a passion for the truth—a truth that is touched upon only through the inscription of a difference that is “a nothing” (*un rien*). Commenting on Porbus’s unfinished canvas: “What’s lacking? A trifle that’s nothing at all, yet a nothing that’s everything.” For Frenhofer, it is this nothing that carries the burden of differentiating the “the appearance of life” from the expression of “its overflowing abundance, that *je ne sais quoi* which might even be the soul, floating like a cloud over the envelope of flesh.”<sup>46</sup>

Yet, it does not end well for Frenhofer. For he is a contradiction incarnate, an absolute master (a master painter) who has placed his talent, his genius, in the service of rendering that which cannot be mastered. His attempt to render the living presence of his troublesome beauty (*la Belle Noiseuse*), Catherine Lescault, results only in her utter dismemberment. All that remains of her is a mere “stroke of the brush” (*coup de pinceau*),<sup>47</sup> the “tip of a bare foot.” When Porbus and Poussin confront the painting, they are not “speechless with admiration” but stupefied and fear they are in fact the objects of a cruel joke.<sup>48</sup>

“The old fraud’s pulling our leg,” Poussin murmured, returning to face the so-called painting [*prétendu tableau*]. “All I see are colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint.”<sup>49</sup>

Howard renders “*prétendu*” on this occasion as “so-called,” which suggests that it is a painting in name only. It is a painting whose status *qua* painting has been suspended through an onslaught of brushstrokes. The painting is all but destroyed. Yet, prompted by the sense that something “must be missing,” Porbus then discovers in the “corner of the canvas” a mere fragment, “the tip of a bare foot emerging from this chaos of colors, shapes, and vague shadings, a kind of incoherent mist; but a delightful foot, a living foot!”<sup>50</sup> The existence of this moment, which Didi-Huberman will make the basis of his account of the detail in painting, arrests the gaze.<sup>51</sup> “They stood stock-still with admiration before this

<sup>46</sup> Balzac, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Balzac, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Balzac, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Balzac, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Balzac, 40–41.

<sup>51</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Peinture Incarnée: Suivi de “Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” d’Honoré de Balzac* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 91–111.

fragment which had escaped from an incredible, slow, and advancing destruction.”<sup>52</sup> They are more literally frozen stiff, petrified, by what they see, this bit of nothing, *un rien*, what Baudelaire might call an embellishment of the void. If the painting is no longer a painting but *prétendu*, this fragment distills its manufactured identity with art. It is no longer a painting (because destroyed) but art. Frenhofer’s masterpiece is unknown because it has literalized the *je ne sais quoi*. It is no longer a painting (having become a mere canvas) and thus nothing at all, but it is only in virtue of being nothing at all that it can be art. It is either a work of art or nothing at all in virtue of the suspension of its status as a painting.

The young Poussin, confronted with such a decision, consigns it to oblivion. “But sooner or later he’ll notice that there’s nothing on his canvas!”<sup>53</sup> It is this judgment that serves to undo Frenhofer’s delusional belief in his genius, shaking him from his naivete. Overcome with crippling “anxiety” he contemplates his “painting” and staggers “as if from a blow,” declaring:

“Nothing, nothing! And after working ten years!” He sat down and wept. “I’m an imbecile then, a madman with neither talent nor ability. Just a rich man who makes no more than what he buys . . . I’ve created nothing!”<sup>54</sup>

Giorgio Agamben, in *The Man without Content*, interprets Balzac’s story as an allegory of an antinomy that, he argues, “traverses the entire history of aesthetics” and constitutes “it’s speculative center and living contradiction.”<sup>55</sup> When the work of art becomes a quest for a living work of art, as it does for Frenhofer, far from opening up a shared world, the work marks the site of a radical division that severs the position of the artist from that of the spectator. What appears to Frenhofer as the very incarnation of the truth is for Poussin and Porbus a mess of paint. The process of refinement, in principle infinite, that brings expression ever closer to the expressed, the signifier to the signified, commits itself to an end whose success can only be utter and complete failure: “The quest for absolute meaning has devoured all meaning, allowing only signs, meaningless forms, to survive. [. . .] In order to leave the evanescent world of forms, he has no

<sup>52</sup> Balzac, *Unknown Masterpiece*, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Balzac, 42.

<sup>54</sup> Balzac, 43.

<sup>55</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 12.

other means than form itself, and the more he wants to erase it, the more he has to concentrate on it to render it permeable to the inexpressible content he wants to express.”<sup>56</sup> Art as such is positioned as the disjunctive synthesis between pure art and its abolition (nonart).

Yet, Agamben overlooks how the “painting” itself inscribes this disjunction through the suspension of its sense *qua* painting. The story lays bare what is at stake in the difference between an art and art, a painting and what appears when a painting is no longer a painting. What appears is not simply nothing—nothingness—but *a* nothing (*un rien*): the void’s embellishment, as it were. The void punctuates nothingness, inserting within it an interval that separates it from its form as negation. What appears is not a what, nor a being, but the presence of an absence, the tip of a bare foot. Less than a fragment, but not nothingness, this fragment of a fragment inscribes the place of an absentee subject. It is painted but its failure to signify a painting allows it to embody a singular lack of significance. It is this punctuality that escapes both Poussin and Frenhofer that the story solicits us, forces us, perhaps, to think. It presents to us an object of absence, a thing in the substituted place of painting. The thing that we all too easily call art.

What is named here is precisely not a sense, but that which appears only in relation to its destruction. We should take Frenhofer’s claim to have “created nothing” quite seriously by shifting stress from what he does to what appears in the contingency of its place. If we focus on what he does, then we are condemned to viewing what appears (i.e., its result) as a bit of bad fortune, symptomatic of an irreparable gap between his intention or desire to make art and the demand that it assume legible form—we are condemned to think that a living work of art in its very accomplishment presents to us death itself. And this failure is a fault that Frenhofer himself cannot live with and wants to destroy forever. He burns his work and then dies. From the perspective of mastery, the remainder (this bit of nothing) is itself unbearable and must disappear, because it can only signify failure.

However, one need not follow the judgment of Poussin. Poussin’s judgment of a failure (there is nothing on the canvas) is in fact a failed judgment. He fails

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<sup>56</sup> Agamben, 10.

to see what is in fact given, which is only given through the form of its failure. We are confronted with a signifier that not only signifies its failure but internalizes a relation to this absence—that is, a signifier that presents its nonsensical presence. Art appears only in and through the failure of the whole to secure the promise of sense. Art is not whole, which is to say, it makes a hole (without a “w”) in sense. Yet, this hole is *not without sense* if we refuse the demand to make sense of it. That which is *not without sense* is what I presented at the beginning as absense.

If we are to take this conjunction seriously (art and absence), then we have to abandon the expectation that art make sense, that its being has a meaning, that its substance is anything other than liquidated. We must take this vacuity seriously. To conclude, let me propose a definition: art is the abscess of absent sense. The “s” adds something to the “c” in absense. It is the abscess of the letter, a contusion of the letter, as if the added stress on the “c” had produced some swelling, as a punch to the gut might produce dropsy, a senseless cedilla (ç), the letter’s bone spur, a part of the letter that is not of the letter and thus cannot be made sense of by reference to the body of language. It is not of language but only appears on its surface as its abscess. Something forced to the surface through a displacement. I would like you to hear the Greek resonance of *oedēma* (from *oiden*, to swell) defined as “a condition characterized by an excess of watery fluid collecting in the cavities or tissues of the body.” Samuel Beckett himself, in a letter to Mary Manning Howe, proposed an idea of “ruptured writing, so that the void may protrude, like a hernia.”<sup>57</sup> Art is perhaps nothing less than the protuberance of the void. Art hollows out sense, filling it with an absence. Art hollows and fills; it makes a vacuole. What appears as art – in and through this nomination – is an absent sense. Art is thus not something that merely resists definition, that is difficult to define. Its lack of definition is definitive. It is positively lacking. It marks the space of an evacuation such that art truly is everything and nothing. Art appears as an herniatic strain in and of culture; art is a rupture that marks the extimate place of absense.

<sup>57</sup> The letter is from July 11, 1937. See Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 521n8.

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