

*LEGENDY Kristóf*¹:

An Escape to Pure Existence

Abstract.

In this brief exposition, I embark on an exploration of the essence of values through the lens of 20th-century art. Art, with its inherent lack of definitive utility, offers a fertile ground for multiple interpretations within its designated realm of meaning. Through a retrospective analysis spanning two centuries of cultural evolution, I seek to unravel the drivers behind shifts in Western mentality and lifestyle, particularly the growing detachment from reality in secular societies, moving towards a realm of pure existence. Enriched with theological and philosophical references, my discourse encourages readers to extract insights from various cultural domains. I frame the human experience within four conceivable stages of interaction between existence and reality, advocating for the fourth stage as my preferred state – one that achieves harmony between existential challenges and moral imperatives, fostering a balance between needs and ethical obligations.

Keywords: God, reality, existence, philosophy of art, aesthetics, value, content

¹ Assistant Professor at Károli Gáspár Reformed University; e-mail: legendy.kristof@gmail.com.



God is real. Of course, one can ponder about God's existence, or can even deny it. Yet no one can deny that, in some way, God is real even for those who deny Him, claiming that He does not exist.² This is an odd situation: one may consider non-existing *objects* to be real.³ Man is personal reality, inasmuch as he assigns value to the entities that surround him or, conversely, considers them to be devoid of any value. Of all living beings, only man is capable of understanding and recognizing that his bodily existence is endowed with some personal reality. This is why he can refer to himself as "I" or "myself".⁴ This short paper is intended to explore the reality of values from the perspective of 20th-century artistic endeavours. I chose art, and 20th-century art in particular, because I am convinced that art as an act is an excellent way to demonstrate that man is a personal reality, with a mission to evaluate the world and, thus, so to say, transcend existence and approach the reality of God.

20th-century art seemingly turned away from the content conveyed by works of art, its focus being shifted to the properties of the material of the works. In the second half of the 20th century, European art was content with the mere description of such properties. What is more, as if in an attempt to escape all physical existence, it aspired to reach a very fundamental level, as it were, to appear as pure energy. Firstly, it got rid all of forms recognizable or identifiable. Then it gave up geometric and amorphous appearance, and, after that, sought to appear in *simple declarative sentences*. The process of self-destruction reached the level of words without context, even the level of non-

² One can deny only existence or existing things but not reality. Denial, in all of its forms, needs the reality of a positive statement.

³ For example, if I have nothing in my pocket, it is something very real to me even if I claim that I do not have any existing entity in my pocket, let alone some money.

⁴ The bodily existence of animals or plants is endowed with its own reality, yet animals or plants do not have the ability to become aware of it. All over the world, many attempts have been made at making the most evolved mammals awaken to their own reality and become capable of conscious differentiation. But, in spite of the powerful impacts, they failed to do so. Animals merely developed new habits or specific behaviours that accompanied their biological needs. This is hardly more than the salivation of Pavlov's dogs. Let us reverse the order: the dog salivates, and then the bell rings. We had not got any closer to the advent of self-awareness because ringing a bell or showing a piece of coloured cardboard marked with simple shapes is not a form of expression but merely the result of conditioning.

appearance, which is devoid of any meaning. Astonishingly, even highly experienced and qualified people were willing to accept pictures never painted, sculptures never created, the zero, the nothing as work of art.⁵ As if it were possible to withdraw from existence as such, to cease to exist. As if such absurdity were some serious achievement or a major act, similar to the great works of art endowed with content that have been created in the past millennia.⁶

Art would be no big deal if it were like any other human activity, that is, if it were useful in some specific way. But there is only one way to use art: to assign a variety of meanings to it, which, frankly, is far from being a specific way of use. One may consider a work of art as good or bad, true or false, beautiful or ugly. One may ascribe content to it, or think of it as having no content. The same work of art allows for radically contradictory interpretations because it was specifically created to make anyone think anything about it. Still, it is utterly impossible for a work of art to embrace all these opposites as identical or to identify the opposites or alternative interpretations. Art in the 20th century (especially in the second half of the century) went astray, inasmuch as *it is impossible to arrive at immaterial art or art without features. Transformation into a state of pure energy is utterly impossible*. All human activity is intended to shape the form of things or factual entities. Man cannot do otherwise, as he either sees something as real, and, therefore, assigns content to it, or considers it to be unreal, banishing it to mere existence.

Before drawing any conclusion, let us consider the possibility of a work of art that has content and another one that has not. I am convinced that content is always attributed to the work of art by the viewer or the recipient, given that material form has no content of its own. Those who think that a work of art has objective content are advised to compare the meaning of the word ‘objective’ with ‘content’. The word ‘objective’ refers to that which is considered to be independent of thought (*obiectum*

⁵ See the ready-made art of Marcel Duchamp or the American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth or Andy Warhol’s soup cans. Cf. ALBERRO, Alexander – STIMSON, Blake (eds.) (1999): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. The MIT Press. BAAS, Jacquelynn (2019): *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life*. The MIT Press. HONNEF, Klaus: (2015) *Warhol*. TASCHEN.

⁶ “Never before has there been an age like ours when the visual image was so cheap in every sense of the word.” GOMBRICH, E. H. (2000): *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Princeton University Press. 8.

meaning ‘object’ or ‘opposed’) on the one hand and to that which is projected (*obicio* meaning ‘cast towards’) on the other. The content of the world considered objective is projected from man because the world has no objective (that is, non-projected) content even if the objects that exist in the world can be taken objective in themselves, as existing entities.⁷ Some say that God (as the greatest content) is objective, but, obviously, this is incorrect terminology. God is not only a reality detached from human thought but also one independent of the world, which means that it cannot be object or objective (projected) in any sense of the word. God’s reality cannot be considered subjective or objective because God is transcendent.⁸

It is easy to see that content can be attributed only to a thing that can be recognized and understood. What kind of content could be attributed to an entity one does not recognize? At best, one may say that it is interesting or uninteresting, attractive or repulsive, but we cannot attribute to it any cognitive property that falls beyond the emotional sphere. Content is the knowledge a human being acquires while he is recognizing the form. But, in turn, one cannot recognize a form without distinguishing between sensory impressions in terms of value. Existence without any form is impossible, and, therefore, so is existence without any content. Even in the case of a “non-figurative” work of art, it is the viewer who attributes content to it, albeit arbitrarily and illogically, freely associating content with the non-recognizable form. (In fact, non-figurative art is not without any form but without recognizable form.) Animals

⁷ As British theologian Eric Mascall puts it: “Its objectivity is not manifested by observers having the same sensory experiences of it, but by their being able, through their diverse sensory experiences to acquire a common understanding of it.” POLKINGHORNE, John C. (1984): *The Quantum World*. New York, Longman Inc. 81.

⁸ An interesting parallel is offered by Christian mysticism, which holds that whatever we may think or say about God, it can never be the complete truth. As Anthony de Mello (1931–1987) says, “Whenever God was mentioned, the Master was keen to point out: God can never be grasped by human thought. God is Mystery, and, consequently, whatever one may say about God, they do not say it about God, but about their own concept of God. Saying that God created the world, or that God loves us, or that God is wonderful falls short of reality. Because one cannot say anything about God. For the sake of accuracy, let us stick to saying: our idea of God created the world, our idea of God loves us, or our idea of God is wonderful. If this is true, then should we abandon any concept of God? You would not have to abandon your idols now, if you had not created them in the first place, said the Master.”

are also capable of distinguishing between impressions yet they do not form a concept based on the stimuli, given that they cannot distinguish between the existent and the real. One may argue that some objects are more important than others for an animal, which means that, in a metaphorical sense of the word, they are more valuable. I argue that the reason for this is not that an animal is capable of attributing any value to a given object (e.g. a dog to a bone) but that the system of rules which sustains the animal's existence automatically considers that form to be useful.⁹ Human beings, on their part, are able to attribute content (or reality) to forms either obeying or breaking the rules that sustain their existence. That is to say, human value judgment is, by definition, *reality judgment*, while the "value judgment" of animals marks merely compliance with the rules of survival. When animals behave in one way or another in response to stimuli, they do not discriminate (or evaluate) the stimuli in terms of their reality content but behave in conformity with the rules of survival. (For example, bumping against transparent glass façades, huge numbers of birds perish since they cannot distinguish between appearance and reality.) It follows that only human beings are capable of making value judgment, but, given that the same term is used to denote decisions that animals instinctively make to survive, I propose to use the term *reality judgement* for humans.¹⁰ Therefore, content is the recognition of perceptions (images) distinguished by reality judgement and, consequently, their transformation to generalized concept. Without reality judgement, an existent entity cannot be endowed with content; it can merely act to ensure the survival of the organism (effect-counter-effect).

It follows from the above that lack of content is equal to the absence of reality judgement. It is a practice whereby the organism aims merely to preserve its existence and to maintain it as safely and as easily as possible. Lack of content does not mean the lack of some existing entity but the lack of the ability to distinguish between existence

⁹ The problem of the source of information on the basis of which an animal can decide about the usefulness of a given form may be examined from evolutionary or theological perspectives, but it is not related closely to the subject of this paper.

¹⁰ Whether something is real or not may only be decided on the basis of measurement, empirical facts, logical deduction, or judgement based on anything else. Consequently, reality is a decision that stems not only from bodily characteristics, the operation of the senses, or the activity of reason. Reality stems from man's spiritual will.

and reality. One may say that lack of content lacks reality.¹¹ Of course, I make a distinction between that which has no content and the mysterious. The mysterious does not lack content, but, still, it holds an indecipherable secret. Such phenomena must be categorized into a third group. By contrast, the enigmatic can be deciphered, so it would belong in the category of entities endowed with content, but deciphering it one does not necessarily arrive at reality, but may well arrive at unreality. Therefore, any decision on the enigmatic must always be made after it has been deciphered. In art, all works that are recognizable and understandable carry some content, while those unrecognizable are devoid of it. For example, *The Tempest* by Giorgione da Castelfranco (1477–1478), along with many surreal works of art, is mysterious. Some metaphysical works are mysterious. Representations of impossible bodies, Dadaist works, or works of Art Informel, monochromatic painting or minimalism can be either endowed with or devoid of content, depending on whether the viewer judges them by the arbitrary – albeit recognizable – form of the material presented as a work of art (in which case they are endowed with content) or sees them merely as possible forms of the raw material (in which case they are devoid of content). The paintings of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) lack content when the paint dripped or splashed from the painter’s tool is regarded as an arbitrary form of the raw material. By contrast, when arbitrary form is accepted as a possible aim of art, they may be deemed to be works of art endowed with content. Given the fact that art always entails the transformation of an arbitrary form of some raw material, the transformation of one arbitrary form into another does not qualify as art in my opinion. By “transformation of an arbitrary form into another”, I mean an uncontrolled process that lacks artistic conception. Without this criterion of distinction, one would have to consider the work of a windstorm or a volcano, for example, as creative artistic activity. According to this criterion, raw materials are to be considered arbitrary not only in their natural but also in their manufactured form (e.g. hollow sections, angles, parts and components, production waste, etc.).

The trend to turn away from content attributable to existing entities or to strive for a contentless state of pure energy marks in fact man fleeing from responsibility. Even anarchy (no matter in which century it occurs) is a way of escaping from responsibility.

¹¹ The absurd or the irrational is made possible by the fact that it is a form that exists in the same way as a form endowed with content does, but it is an entity devoid of content (reality).

What is more, anarchists tried to extend anarchy way beyond their personal scope, in an attempt to make sure that no member of the larger social community may be held responsible so that they can escape even the remotest possibility of condemnation. J. Stuart Mill (1806–1873), the father of liberalism, regarded tolerant human behaviour as an opportunity for the further progress for human civilization. Yet, as historical experience shows, tolerance, when lacking value judgement, does not build but destroys. Nietzsche (1844–1900) argued with romantic fervour that one must transcend good and evil because human beings cannot be free until they shed responsibility.¹² Paradoxically, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) calls on man, condemned to total freedom, to become himself by refraining from any definition of existence – beyond freedom.¹³ Cézanne’s (1839–1906) art was appreciated for its anarchism as early as at the beginning of the 20th century. The wild expressionism of *les Fauves*, the cubism of Picasso (1881–1973) and Braque (1882–1963), futurism, the Dada movement, and even the geometric endeavour of constructivism pointed in the same direction: towards a pure existence detached from content (reality). The detection of the same trend in metaphysical painting or surrealism would call for a somewhat more complicated explanation, which I will analyse and justify in more detail another time. For now, it will suffice to say that these endeavours also pointed to the direction of lack of content.

In art (apart from the aberrant fiddling of Fluxus art), symbols are materials shaped for their own sake. Here, “for their own sake” means that all forms, whether natural, realistic, geometric, amorphous, etc., are made with the intention of producing a work of art. Works of art, on their part, are entities whose sole purpose is to be endowed with various meanings. They serve no other purpose, which means that they

¹² Nietzsche holds that the existence of God must be denied to ensure the freedom of the individual, because atheism will achieve its true victory only when man is freed from the guilt God has placed on him. Cf. NIETZSCHE, Friederich (2016): *The Joyful Wisdom*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

¹³ According to Sartre, man first of all exists, encounters himself, appears in the world, and only then defines himself. Man can make himself whatever he wants to, or, rather, he is what he makes of himself. Sartre’s conclusions cannot be accepted because if the priority of existence were assumed as a universal truth, it would follow that existence without essence can exist, which, however, is only possible by abstraction. Cf. SARTRE, Jean-Paul (1947): *Existentialism*. New York, Philosophical Library. 18.

are symbols to be interpreted. The first timid attempts to get rid of symbols endowed with content was Rococo, which Classicist therapy was unable to remedy. The mysterious that emerged in Romanticism was, in fact, the enigmatic. This time it was not an isolated case but a social movement unfolding over a broad horizon. It was the opposite of Sentimentalism, so to speak, as extreme subjectivism took an outward turn, towards common social existence, which culminated in anarchy in Post-Impressionist painting at the end of the century. Of course, Sentimentalism itself was a phase of the dialectical movement of the absurd. The various forms of avant-garde may be considered as minor stops of the very same process. It was the second half of the 20th century that saw a major change, when symbols crossed the demarcation line defined by the criterion I presented above. Masses of artists freely resorted to banal content and on empty commonplaces and pretended to be mysterious in a downright dumb manner, ridiculing the world of recognizable forms and symbols endowed with content as unsupportable. Pollock's art may mark the limit beyond which (that is, beyond art) pop art, op art, happening, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, The New Fauves, etc. appeared. A detailed list of such trends is given by many contemporary theorists, and, of course, it includes the many forms of Fluxus art. Perhaps it was concept art that got the farthest: it is a movement which is content with the mere idea of a work of art. In some of its forms, it stops at the description or statement of a single concept without context, and sometimes even before that, at the phase of not stating or not showing. The pursuit of lack of content has done and continues to do a great service to neoliberal politics; therefore, escape from reality (content) into empty existence is a political instrument that falls beyond the scope of art. *Intermediate art*, for example, is a direct political weapon, similar to the instruments of legislation or execution. Albeit "intermedia" tries to position itself under the aegis of art, disguising itself, it is in fact neoliberal propaganda, urban guerrilla warfare, agitation that pretends to be mysterious, the confusion of reality judgements, or, to use a fashionable term: *cultural terrorism*.

At the beginning of my reflection, I suggested that the widespread acceptance of *art lacking content* is indeed astonishing, which I partly attributed to attempts to escape from the responsibility that stems from reality judgement. Yet it must be accepted that masses of people are not able to distinguish existence from reality. Still, people are always guided by reality judgements given that they do not think or do anything that they do not deem to be real. They do not distinguish the real ideas of the good, the true and the

beautiful from existence, and, consequently, they may deem entities that lack meaning or content as good, true, and beautiful. This false approach to value is not only a means of making art collectors loosen the purse strings, but it also serves as an instrument of creating social disruption. When people can no longer tell apart real value and the interest of existence, they can no longer navigate in the world, a clear evidence of which is consumer society and its totally meaningless consumer behaviour. Such anomalous aspirations are detected not just in art. A crisis of values is evident in all aspects of life. One of the major threats is posed by the virtual world, as it makes the real and the unreal merge inextricably for the man in the street. Narrated or written events, painted or drawn pictures, sculptures and stage plays had less destructive impacts on values, as it was always up to the viewer to decide whether the represented event or the phenomenon was real or not. However, in today's digital world, this is no longer a personal decision. No matter if memes are real or merely existent (illusory), they represent the same value. There is no value difference between a battle of tanks controlled with joysticks and a battle between tanks driven by humans; and the objective is precisely to make simulation (virtual reality) as real as possible. Neither a Renaissance or Baroque painting nor an Impressionist or Cubist work of art could ever create deceptively real illusion. Its impact depended on the recipients' belief, that is, the extent to which they deemed the work of art to be real. By now, scientific and technical progress has reached a level where all too often it is almost impossible to tell if an entity was created by a human being or by nature. This means that in most cases there is no point in asking if something is real or unreal (illusion). This may bring about the complete malfunctioning of mankind's capacity for value judgement. In history, there have always been pseudo-phenomena, that is, entities which appeared to be real but were not. For a long time, until the dawn of the 20th century, such phenomena inspired thinkers to try and distinguish pseudo- and real phenomena accurately. One may say that in the last century this effort has been reversed at a global level, with most people arguing and acting against such a distinction. The 20th century was marked by equality, by tolerance, and by the elimination of differences. Liberalism (and especially neoliberalism) no longer sought to implement its Nietzschean programme of *beyond good and evil* but to identify the real and the unreal, the worth and the worthless, infecting society with the virus of the equivalence of the meaningful and the meaningless. This, in turn, has led to total mistrust and uncertainty.

In 2012, the Hungarian sculptor Gyula Pauer (1941–2012) passed away. He created pseudo-objects (hemispheres that looked flattened, hemispheres that looked like cones, steel cubes with a crumpled surface, and the like – obviously, the objects were completely smooth, neither crumpled nor flattened nor cone-shaped) and declared the advent of pseudo-art. Unfortunately, he did not formulate pseudo in critical terms; instead, he referred to it as a model, a goal to be achieved, or an ideal to be realized. Seemingly, this marked a return to the pre-Nietzschean categories of good and evil, given that Pauer attributed a positive value to pseudo. But, obviously, the identification of reality and illusion (or false and true) made a highly destructive impact. Nietzsche merely asserted that there is no good and evil but did not deny the difference between existing entities. By contrast, Pauer’s pseudo denies this very difference (“...does not only deny manipulated existence but also affirms it...”;¹⁴ or, to cite another example, Pauer created a voting slip on which *no* could be read both as *yes* and *no*, and *yes* both as *no* and *yes*). In the 1970s, many artists shared this approach, deeming zero to be something or black to be white and vice versa, and a multitude of artwork was produced that failed to differentiate the meaningful from the meaningless or entities with content from those without content, even identified as being similar.¹⁵ It is well worth a thorough investigation why people of our time deny differences so readily, why they are so susceptible to identifying reality and existence, and what are the psychological, sociological, or even genetic factors that have shaped the course of Western culture in this manner. I believe that the cultural history of the West has been shaped by perceived interests and by short-sighted pursuit of profit. A possible approach is to apply the Christian model and use the triad of *interest–habit–profit* to denote the profane trinity that defines existence as opposed to the transcendent trinity of *the good–the true–the beautiful*. In fact, the immanent trinity is the most abstract formulation of the rules of existence, while the transcendent trinity is the formulation of real values. This is how existence and reality, value and price, *the good–the true–the beautiful*, and the *interest–habit–profit* stand in opposition to each other in 20th-century Western culture. Only few

¹⁴ From Pseudo Manifesto [*Pszeudo kiáltvány*], 1970. www.pauergyula.hu.

¹⁵ For example, the Austrian *artist* Hermann Nitsch had Orgy-Mystery Games as early as in the 1970s. His compositions feature slaughtered and disembowelled animals, naked people covered in blood, often crucified.

people recognize this opposition, yet it does exist. And no matter how much effort is made to blur the distinction, the crisis of values cannot be denied and has increasingly severe consequences.

In conclusion, let me elaborate on the strange duality of existence and reality. It seems that human behaviour has basically four possible stages. The first one is when humans do not care about either reality or existence, live only for the moment, pursuing fleeting pleasures. A peculiar and saddening variant of this stage is utter deprivation, when the moment presents nothing but mere continued existence or, rather, vegetating, which does not bring pleasure but downright pain. Clearly, in this stage, humans care about neither existence nor reality. The second stage is when man attributes significance to existence, subordinating reality to it. Today, it is a general bourgeois concept, the most common approach and model of thinking. The production, collection, exchange, scientific cognition, and teaching of existent entities (that is, all that humans can do with existing entities) has grown into such an essential aspect, an end, or a passion for possession that it completely obscures real value, revealing the infinite world of existence, with all its mind-boggling bizarreness. The third stage is when the intellect radically turns inwards to such an extent that it understands: its whole life is a manifestation of values. As a result, there is nothing more to it than attachment to the reality of values. Here the human being pays attention to nothing else but to the transcendent world of values, that is, reality. If need be, he easily renounces all that exists – even his own existence. This is the knowledge of the certainty of reality, of a human condition that is more significant and essential than existence. This knowledge is more than the sum of all what one may know. In fact, it is faith. The fourth stage or option is that man takes equally into account the challenges of existence and the demands of reality. Such a way of thinking and living is an attempt to create harmony between needs and moral requirements, always distinguishing material and factual existence and the reasons that stem from normative reality and influence decisions. This is the self-conscious and dignified experience of bodily existence and spiritual reality. The life of man is marked by perpetual conflict, precisely due to the fact that he exists at a border. At the same time, life is also capable of exploring paradoxes. As John says, *then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

References:

- ALBERRO, Alexander – STIMSON, Blake (eds.) (1999): *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. The MIT Press.
- BAAS, Jacquelynn (2019): *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life*. The MIT Press.
- DE MELLO, Anthony (1988): *One Minute Wisdom*. The Crown Publishing Group.
- HONNEF, Klaus: (2015) *Warhol*. TASCHEN.
- GOMBRICH, E. H. (2000): *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Princeton University Press.
- NIETZSCHE, Friederich (2016): *The Joyful Wisdom*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- POLKINGHORNE, John C. (1984): *The Quantum World*. New York, Longman Inc.
- SARTRE, Jean-Paul (1947): *Existentialism*. New York, Philosophical Library.