

Brightpoint Community College

Art's Movement:

Aesthetics, Realization, and Transcendence

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## Abstract

This paper proposes the A.R.T. Framework—Aesthetics, Realization, and Transcendence—which locates art's enduring essentiality in the dynamic, transformative experience of the viewer. Building on Arthur C. Danto's conceptual structure as the necessary spark, the framework employs John Dewey's pragmatic aesthetics, defining art as a cycle of doing and undergoing that synthesizes the chaotic material of life into coherent, felt meaning. This process is affirmed by neurobiology, where the cognitive struggle (or friction) of the beholder's share results in a neurological resolution that transforms the passive observer into a necessary co-creator of the work. The paper further argues that this mechanism validates contemporary practices, including AI art, by locating creative friction in the human artist's intentionality and their struggle to extract coherent meaning from the algorithm.

Ultimately, the paper argues that art's most vital function is a cultural one: to aggressively reintroduce the tension necessary to combat the spiritual complacency of Friedrich Nietzsche's Last Man. The culminating experience of a Naturalistic Transcendence is defined as a grounded expansion of the self, achieved by affirming the terrifying paradoxes of life and inspiring the individual's moral revolution toward volition and the lifelong process of *Bildung*. By asserting a pluralistic and world-affirming purpose, the A.R.T. framework reclaims art as a tool for individual self-cultivation and heightened moral connection to the human condition.

## 1. AESTHETICS: The End of Art, and Invisible Differences

We must first establish and emphasize that not all things which are generally considered art today are defined solely by their appearance. Many contemporary artworks, in particular, are designated as "art" for reasons that are not immediately evident. This is the source of much confusion within the "Modern" wings of museums, for it is entirely understandable for the typical observer to encounter a piece and ask, "What makes this art?". In contrast, the historical wings make the basis for pinpointing the pieces clearly apparent as they are aesthetically captivating, carefully executed masterpieces, with technical skill serving as the essential criteria for their recognized aesthetic and narrative functions. The problem that arises is, given this, how could one distinguish between two objects, which *look* exactly the same, but one is art and one is not? The philosopher, Arthur C. Danto explored these questions, ultimately concluding with what he termed the *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and the *End of Art*.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary art is visually indistinguishable from everyday objects and tends to provoke a kind of intellectual contemplation, and it is on this basis that potentially re-contextualizes an object to now be considered art. There is a difference between visually indiscernible objects, but the difference is not visible.<sup>3</sup> The expanding definition of Western Art over centuries has reached a threshold where aesthetic properties alone are no longer sufficient to classify something as art. Thus, any object can now be deemed

as "Art," provided its classification is justified beyond purely visual characteristics, beyond Aesthetics.<sup>3</sup>

The historical narrative of Western Art was long characterized by a drive towards fidelity, defined by a goal of artistic verisimilitude, or life-likeness. Plato classically viewed Art as an imitation of reality (or Greek: *mimesis*), comparing a painting to a mirror of which only reflects imperfect representations of perfect ideals, “twice removed from truth.”<sup>7</sup> Art, he argued, is ultimately a form of misguiding the viewer from truth, playing on their emotions, and potentially corrupting their souls. Thus, art and artists have no place in the ideal state of Plato’s Republic.<sup>7</sup> However, it was immediately Aristotle who, although concurring that art is imitative, diverged from Plato by viewing the moral benefits in art’s capacity of imbuing a state of catharsis and knowledge in the common spectator.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle observed the viewing of Greek tragedies in particular as capable of inspiring in the audience a purifying emotional experience of empathic relatability to the character's struggles from the safety of their seats, as well as providing an edifying educational experience when reflecting on the universal truths embedded in the stories. The paradox inherent in this sensibility is both an impactful and negatively pleasurable experience. Art, though merely a representation of reality, was viewed by Aristotle as a form that potentially allows one to grasp universal insights, particularly those regarding human experience and morality.<sup>7</sup>

At the outset, there is a functional difference between classical and contemporary conceptions of what *Art* is. Conceptually, the word is classically viewed as the

application of knowledge (Greek: *technē*), the root of technique and technology.

Etymologically, the word is directly derived from (Latin: *ars*), which was originally defined as a form of craft dependent on technical skill, synonymous to *technē*.

Historically, the primary goal of this craftsmanship was *mimesis*. It was only later in history that a philosophical divide emerged, distinguishing *Fine Art*, valued for its unique aesthetic or intellectual content, from *Craft*, which became associated with functional utility and the reproducible application of skill.

In the many centuries following the founders of Western philosophy, Western art continued the pursuit of portraying perfection, valuing the representation of references as the highest technical achievement, which served the ultimate goal of expressing spiritual and philosophical ideals. A goal made seemingly more possible by, for example, the invention of the vanishing point technique, and the tremendous cultural influence and revitalization of the creative spirit of Classical Antiquity in the Renaissance (or English: rebirth ).<sup>17</sup>

Arthur Danto, multidisciplinary philosopher, and professional art critic observed this drive as the linear and goal-oriented narrative history of art that finally exhausted itself in the middle of the 20th century, establishing The End of Art. Danto adopted G.W.F Hegel's view that history is a dialectical progression— a three-stage historical pattern—but applied it, in a contemporary sense, directly to art after Hegel.<sup>3</sup>

According to Hegel's influential framework, History unfolds in three progressive stages, beginning with Art, then Religion, and finally Philosophy; through which a

collective human spirit (or German: *geist*) gradually achieves complete understanding of its own nature, abilities, and place in the world.<sup>7</sup> This progression culminates in a conceptual mode of existence, by which the collective Spirit's attainment of self-realization signifies the end of history. Here, the Spirit no longer needs to express itself through finite, material forms (like religious imagery, or representative art). Instead, it attains pure self-knowledge, understanding its own nature and truth directly through thought, reason, and concept by the means of Philosophy. However, this "end" is not the halt of historical events going forward; it's the end of History's movement towards a predetermined end goal, the Spirit's self-realization is the end goal. Hegel outlined the historical progression of Art itself toward the self-realization of the Spirit through three phases of its own. The initial phase is Symbolic art, which attempts to represent ideals but is ultimately inadequate, managing only imperfect symbols and allegories.<sup>7</sup> It would then, for him, be the Classical art of Antiquity, Greek sculpture in particular, that succeeded in perfection of representation, thus fulfilling its role of expressing the ideal on par, but distinct from Religion and Philosophy. For Hegel, the shift culminating in Romantic art actually marked the *decline* in art's function as a means towards self-knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In this perspective, as art pursues truth, it increasingly transforms into an object of intellectual thought rather than of sensory perception. Consequently, Art merges with and gives way to Philosophy as the ultimate tool towards truth, and, in turn, is diminished in its significance as a primary form of human expression altogether. It is often noted that Hegel, as a contemporary of the Romantics, viewed the movement's rejection of the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, as the

final, imperfect stage in art's development. For Heegel, the collective Spirit could no longer be adequately expressed in a sensuous, artistic form, thereby necessitating a shift to the higher forms of Religion and Philosophy. The Romantic Movement was no longer about seeking truth, more it was a passionate embrace of emotion, individualism, and the *Sublime* power of nature, which directly contrasted with the rationalism that preceded it. The subject of art became less a reflection of the external world, and more a turn inwards—a sentiment that would greatly influence the trajectory of modern art.

Hegel's *synthesis* of art ultimately served as a new *thesis*. As Danto observed, it was the invention of the 19th-century photographic camera, the definitive tool for accurate representation, that finally prompted a widespread reassessment of whether aesthetic appearance was, in fact, the sole objective of art.<sup>3</sup> The advent of the camera initially seemed to affirm the idea that the artist's work was now without a purpose. If a camera could record a scene with greater speed and accuracy than a human could ever possibly do, the relevance of a medium like painting was immediately called into question. Given the prevailing historical emphasis on imitation, what Danto called "perceptual equivalence", this technological innovation understandably caused confusion regarding the direction of art at the time.

For example, in response to his libel trial of Whistler v. Ruskin in 1878, the artist James Whistler would state that, "If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer"<sup>17</sup>. This was after Whistler sued a critic while attempting to protect his

reputation, and found himself in a legal battle that seemed to put the very definition of art on trial. The case centered on Whistler's controversial painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, which Ruskin had viciously critiqued as "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."<sup>17</sup> Although Whistler ultimately won a symbolic victory (but tragically went bankrupt because of it), the trial highlighted the emerging rift between traditional aesthetic values, which privileged the mimetic skills, time, and labor. The mention of the photographer, however intended rhetorically and jokingly to dismiss the purely imitative arts, inadvertently acknowledged the challenge that the camera posed to the very purpose of painting instead. Here, it's clear that photography, and all of its precision, had challenged the link between visual art and the mere faithful reproduction of reality; compelling a visual artform such as painting to seek its significance elsewhere. Whistler, a leading figure of the movement known as *Aestheticism*, who, alongside Oscar Wilde, rejected the emphasis on art's moral or narrative function, promoting the "uselessness" of art's content by priding the beauty of its aesthetic properties as its only purpose. "Art for Art's sake" (or Latin: *ars gratia artis*), proclaimed the Aesthetes, in a way, echoing sentiments of the Greeks in the ideal of *Hellenism* as a life centered on art and beauty, but diverging from prioritizing the goodness and virtue the ancients linked it to. They sought to live life as a work of art itself, prioritizing the luxurious, decadent, and self-indulgent experience that accompanied it. Most importantly however, the Aestheticism movement, while still primarily visual, marked a significant break from the established narratives of the past, paving the way for the experimentation and

expression of the many movements and manifestos of *Modernism* which attempted to reinvigorate Art after the camera's advent.

A relevant art historical comparison for visualizing this Modern break is found in contrasting Raphael's *School of Athens* (1511) with Gustav Klimt's *Philosophy* (1900). Both represent two distinct and opposing faces of the concept of Philosophy itself.<sup>10</sup> The *School of Athens* is a masterpiece of symmetrical and highly detailed depictions of the great thinkers of Antiquity, Plato and Aristotle framed in the center, their contrasting worldviews symbolized by their hand gestures. It is the visual embodiment of the belief that art's highest calling is to reflect an objective, divine truth. Nearly four hundred years later, the University of Vienna commissioned Klimt to paint their ceiling to celebrate that exact same triumph of human reason, but Klimt delivered a radical rejection of the classical narrative. Instead of symmetry, Klimt presented Philosophy as a dark, formless cosmic void. In place of the great thinkers, he painted a tangled column of bodies drifting blindly through the suffering of birth, life, and death, prompting eighty-seven professors to petition against the work. It was more than a mere disagreement over aesthetics; it represented an institutional clash between two distinct philosophical eras.

The appearance of this impact was truly felt in 1915, when Marcel Duchamp purchased a snow shovel from a hardware store in New York, signed it, and declared it to be a work of art that he titled *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. This was one of the first of his "Readymades": non-art objects which were purposely recontextualized to be

presented as art. These pieces were more so experiments; to see if artistic value can be shifted from physical craft to ideas and intentions. To see if an ordinary object could be recognized as art through selection, implication, and presentation alone. A move away from art that Duchamp referred to as “retinal”—the established purely visual narrative—into a mode that is purely *conceptual*. This conceptual shift was more a form of anti-art that aligned so well with the Dadaist Movement of which he pioneered.<sup>3</sup> Two years later, his notorious presentation of a urinal ironically titled *Fountain*, bemused the art world. The anti-art nature of *Fountain* was its purpose and provocation. It was mass-produced, utilitarian, and uncommonly vulgar, mocking the idea of the unique, beautiful, and handcrafted artwork that had been so cherished historically. Born from a cynical response to the atrocities of World War I, Dadaism was a movement that deliberately rejected the accepted norms in art and culture. The name "Dada" itself, a nonsensical word, encapsulated the movement's embrace of the irrationality and absurdity that characterized its aesthetic appeal. It was a rejection of aesthetics, to open the potentialities of art that lies beyond mere appearance. As Danto makes clear, what Duchamp unveiled here was fundamentally a philosophical challenge that compelled a reexamination of the limitations of what could be considered art. Shattered was the long-held notion that something must possess certain discernible aesthetic properties to be art. When an artist's declaration and intentional placement in a gallery could transform any object into "art," the essence of art transitioned from residing in a work's intrinsic visual quality to being a purely conceptual property. This move, perhaps best exemplified by Duchamp's eventual abandonment of the art world to play chess, greatly

influenced subsequent artists who further dissolved the boundaries between art and everyday life, most notably Andy Warhol.

Danto identified that the culmination of the historical trajectory of Art occurred in 1964 when Warhol unveiled *Brillo Box*.<sup>3</sup> Stacked plywood, painted and stenciled to look exactly like the commercial packaging of the Brillo soap pads. The two Brillo Boxes were objects of "perceptual equivalence", they looked exactly alike. But, one was available for purchase at the supermarket; and the other was presented and revered as a work of art. Like Duchamp, what Warhol did was provoke a philosophical examination of what truly is the difference between the two objects. The difference between what the two artists did is that Duchamp showed that anything *could* be art, but Warhol showed that the difference between art and non-art is not a *physical* property. Danto came to the conclusion that the qualities that make the distinction between the artwork and the commonplace object were not visible.<sup>3</sup> That the meaning and purpose of a work of art lies beyond its aesthetic properties. In the grocery store, the Brillo box is a container. In the art gallery, the *Brillo Box* is a statement about containers, commerce, aesthetics, et cetera. For Danto, the work of art is an *embodied meaning*, the commonplace object is just the medium for an idea. It is the artwork's embodied meaning that distinguishes it from a non-art object and transfigures it into an art object. The relationship between meaning and embodiment in the work of art is the invisible difference for Danto. Since the difference between the two is invisible, art had finally "ended" its long journey of trying to define itself through the visual, arriving at a realization where the distinction could only be understood conceptually. Here, art realized its non-visual, philosophical

nature. The historical narrative was completed as art self-discovered its conceptual mode of existence. Thus, Danto declared that this finally was the "End of Art."

However, this "end", like Hegel's "end", was obviously not the end of making art. It was not a eulogy, but rather, an emancipation from the constraints of tradition. It was necessary for Danto to clarify that the declaration of the end of art history meant the end of art's linear and progressive historical narrative. We now entered what he described as the *post-historical* era in art, where all styles, and mediums, from classical figuration and technē, to the most radical of abstractions, were suddenly available and viable in a pluralistic art world. Art could look like anything, it could be about anything, but what it looks like is no longer the sole factor of whether or not something is art. This fundamentally placed art beyond aesthetics, beyond physical appearance alone.

To illustrate the progression of how Danto's thesis contextualizes the shifts towards the end of art history, consider the following examples found in the realm of Music. While the thrust of Danto's thesis relies entirely on the visual indiscernibility of the art object, the history of music exhibits a parallel structural shift in artistic aims that mirrors Danto's narrative trajectory. Mozart, a prominent figure of the Classical era in music, created compositions that are characterized by their emphasis on harmony, balance, and formal structures. Music does not directly engage in visual representation in the same way as painting or sculpting, however Mozart's work can be interpreted as striving for a kind of auditory perceptual equivalence. His compositions adhered to the established musical fundamentals of the time—rules of harmony, balance, and formal

structure—not as an end in itself, but as the essential techniques required to embody and express an idealized, universal emotional and aesthetic truth. This pursuit of formal perfection mirrors the visual arts' historical drive toward verisimilitude, where technical skill was the means to represent the highest form of beauty and divinity. Further in the historical progression of music, a 1969 soul single by The Winstons titled *Amen Brother*, possessed a kind of raw energy and rhythmic complexity that resonated deeply within musical culture, particularly with its six-second drum solo, referred to as the “Amen Break”. The distinctive rhythmic pattern embodies an expressive energy and reflects the cultural and social context of its time, a communication of feeling and inner states that breaks away from the traditional narratives. To then fully grasp the movement to the contemporary landscape, one must draw a distinction between the *post-historical* and *postmodern*. Danto does not see the post-historical as a style, but as the broad temporal condition defining the present era. Within this vast, permissive container exists *Postmodernism*, which is a specific attitude or stylistic approach characterized by irony, pastiche, skepticism toward grand narratives, and a blurring of boundaries between mediums and cultures. The widespread use of the Amen Break illustrates the post-historical condition at work as it has become one of the most sampled loops in music history, and found across genres like Breakbeat, Drum and Bass, Intelligent Dance Music (IDM), and Hip-Hop. Sampling itself is an act of appropriation and recontextualization that demonstrates a self-awareness of music history. So, when an artist like Aphex Twin utilizes the Amen Break on a track like *Girl/Boy Song*, he is operating in a purely post-historical manner. He takes a recognizable fragment from the

past and synthesizes it with complex electronic programming and classical string arrangements. In the 1998 track *Bucephalus Bouncing Ball*, he takes what sounds like a commonplace marble bouncing on a glass table, and transfigures it into a chaotic composition of rapid-fire drum patterns and melodies. It's a pluralistic blending of diverse styles, showcasing an unprecedented freedom from historical and stylistic constraints.

Aphex Twin also masterfully wields the postmodern attitude within this post-historical freedom, exemplified in a 1999 track often referred to as *Equation*. In this piece, he embeds a digital photograph of his own grinning face into the song's sonic frequencies, only visible when the track is run through a spectrogram program. This conceptual stunt is inherently postmodern as it is a self-referential, ironic gesture that collapses the boundary between distinct mediums, hiding a visual element inside the non-visual realm of music.<sup>20</sup> Yet, this postmodern irony is only made possible by Danto's post-historical reality. Because art is no longer defined by its formal aesthetics of how it looks or sounds, but by its "embodied meaning," the invisible face in the audio frequencies is validated as a legitimate artistic statement. The post-historical era provides a freedom where "anything goes," allowing an artist to be profoundly sincere or shockingly ironic.

Arthur Danto's contribution marks a seemingly irreversible shift in the philosophy of art, fundamentally liberating the creative endeavor from the historical chains of visual representation. His thesis compels both the artist and the viewer to look

past the surface to focus instead on the meaning that elevates and differentiates a work of art from an ordinary artifact. The liberation inherent in this post-historical condition has gifted the contemporary artist with a palette of unbounded creative possibilities. With traditional narratives and stylistic constraints dissolved or rendered optional, the scope of artistic expression is now virtually limitless. These unprecedented grounds, however, have not only transformed the creative act but, perhaps more significantly, has repositioned the role of the viewer. The audience is no longer a passive recipient. The viewer can now become a co-creator, tasked with navigating artworks that may deliberately lack conventional context, or clear meanings. They should feel compelled to engage in an intentional, intellectual, and emotional process to actively construct the meaning of the work, which is a point I will return to. But, because the distinction between a genuine work of art and an indistinguishable object is fundamentally "invisible", the philosophical definition of art has become intrinsically conceptual and intellectual. The full appreciation of contemporary art often necessitates a considerable intellectual engagement with its theory and history. This required intellectual labor, however, serves as a necessary precursor that primes the individual for the subsequent, heightened phase of embodied meaning and experience. Art beyond aesthetics must not be perceived as a finality or an ultimate end, but as the spark of a heightened interaction and connection between the self and the world. The conceptual framework characterizing the *End of Art* is essential because it severs the link between art and its singular historical mandate (mimesis), clearing the ground for a re-engagement with a function we now locate outside of history and within individual experience.

## **2. REALIZATION: Doing, Undergoing, and The Beholder's Share**

To solely experience is not to realize. A purely passive sensory encounter—like the skin's instinctive reaction to a change in temperature—is a state of being, but it is not a dynamic and coherent event of engagement. This is the distinction between general experience and a unified, transformative aesthetic experience. The experience we are pursuing here is a compelled, intentional re-creation, where we (the “live creature,” a term borrowed from John Dewey) must actively navigate an encounter with the work of art.<sup>4</sup>

In our current pluralistic era, the "definition" of art is no longer the challenge. Its value, though no longer solely determined by historical qualities like beauty or life-likeness, can be found in this active, unified, and felt engagement. When this interaction is successful, it is capable of transforming the viewer from a bystander into a co-creator alongside the artist. In this act, the viewer constructs meaning by projecting their own “interior life onto the canvas,” resolving ambiguity to turn a subjective encounter into a shared human experience. This is the Realization: the fulfilling culmination of the experience of art, which serves as a natural bridge, grounding the value of art in the clarified sense of connection and harmony it brings to the relationship between the self and the world.

We find ourselves back, standing in the echoing expanse of a contemporary gallery, searching for the meaning, the justification for why the objects occupy the room.

Although the "End of Art" provided a necessary liberation by decoupling art from the constraints of traditional aesthetics, the new means of evaluation can be perceived as introducing a sense of detachment in how we encounter it. By elevating an invisible concept above a tangible object, simply appreciating contemporary art often demands intellectual prerequisites—a trend that can risk divorcing the work from the lived reality of the everyday observer.

This dissonance is reminiscent of a historical crisis in Philosophy itself, which by the time of the 19th-century following Darwin's *Theory of Evolution*, had grown detached and removed from the interests of the average person. It was against this backdrop that a new school of thought in America known as *Pragmatism*, emerged. The most notable pragmatists—Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and William James (frequently hailed as the "father of American psychology")—drew heavy inspiration from Darwinian naturalism. They attempted to move away from abstracted theories towards practical consequences and lived experience as the ultimate measure of truth and value. The pragmatic theory of truth is frequently reduced to the maxim "truth is what works," but the validity of that simplification is secondary to this analysis. Of paramount importance is the pragmatic perspective on aesthetics, which found its most definitive expression in John Dewey's seminal 1934 work, *Art as Experience*.<sup>4</sup>

For Dewey, art is defined by the "event of engagement", which is a continuous interaction between the "live creature and its environment".<sup>4</sup> His thesis is that aesthetic appreciation is fundamentally rooted in biological rhythms and the most commonplace

of human activities. He makes clear that historically, art was inextricably interwoven into daily life. It was not a specialized sub-category of culture, but the very fabric of life and communal identity—integrated into religious rituals, awe-inspiring architecture of civic spaces, and the meticulous, loving craftsmanship of functional tools like woven baskets or ceramic vessels. It was a shared utility. An integration that reveals a reason why the ancients valued art primarily for its representational power; it was a seamless component of their daily lives. Dewey observes that the modern art institutional frameworks, driven by commodification and the academic urge to categorize, have quarantined these objects, stripping them of their active utility and placing them on hushed pedestals. He dismantles the "museum conception of art" as the artificial walls separating "the esoteric idea of fine art" from the vitality of everyday existence.<sup>4</sup>

What art does for Dewey is take the raw, chaotic material of life and mold it into a coherent, organized, and emotionally satisfying form—a movement from tension toward an equilibrium.<sup>4</sup> The ability to accomplish this successfully, above technical skill, is what distinguishes someone as an artist for Dewey. The artist's job is not just to feel something, but to give form to that feeling in a way that can be perceived and understood by others.<sup>4</sup> Within this context, Dewey argues that the most powerful and enduring art is functionally non-didactic: its aim is not to preach or deliver a static message, but to express a feeling so profoundly and accurately that it necessitates a creative re-enactment by the observer. In doing so, the artist does not just create an object; they necessitate an audience. They expose the underlying nature of their own subjective chaos to the world, making the artwork an act of extreme vulnerability. And

by providing a structure that enables strangers to share in a resonant aesthetic trajectory, the artist connects isolated consciousnesses. The resulting meaning in a work of art transcends the personal, subjective experience. Rather than acting as a reflection of our private lives, it stands as a monument to the shared human condition.

Crucially, the skill to perceive something aesthetically, rather than merely recognizing it, requires a mobilization of the observer's own history and imagination.<sup>4</sup> In this view, the observer becomes a co-creator because they must perform a re-creation of the creative act itself, synthesizing sensory data into a unified, meaningful whole. Dewey frames art as a preeminent form of communication.<sup>4</sup> By acting as a mediator that breathes life into concepts that can otherwise remain abstract, like philosophy, art serves to narrow the divide between distinct cultures, individuals, and ideas. And by engaging with this shared experience, the audience takes the raw, chaotic material of everyday existence and sees it ordered and intensified. Art's great power is that it takes the overwhelm of life and temporarily makes it coherent, manageable, and deeply purposeful. This reciprocal participation is what Dewey refers to as the cycle of "doing and undergoing," where the observer's *doing* (the active projection of memory and imagination) is met by the *undergoing* (the emotional reception and endurance of the artwork's form).<sup>4</sup>

Dewey argues that treating meaning as a *permanent* property of a physical object is one of the fundamental misunderstandings of art.<sup>4</sup> Because the work of art is an experience, the meaning only exists during that interaction. Therefore, meaning cannot

be fixed; it must be as fluid as human experience itself. When you look at a painting, you bring your entire life history to the encounter. Since no two people have the exact same history, no two people will generate the exact same meaning from the art. Furthermore, if you return to a painting ten years later, you are an evolved person with new experiences, which means the artwork will interact with you differently and generate a newly evolved meaning. He notes that the Parthenon in Athens meant something entirely different to the ancient Greeks than it does to a modern tourist; to the ancients, it was a hub of civic and religious life—its meaning was tied to their survival and societal values. To the tourist, it is a historical monument and a symbol of classical beauty. Dewey holds that its capacity to interact with different generations in meaningful ways proves its vitality as a work of art. This fluid conceptualization of meaning underscores Dewey's skepticism toward museums, which often attempt to anchor a work within a solitary, "correct" historical narrative.

Herein lies the difference between Danto and Dewey: Both thinkers attempt to answer two entirely different questions about the human relationship with art, but their theories are *sequential*, not antagonistic.<sup>4</sup> Danto asks what grants an object the *permission* to be art, asserting that its value lies in a conceptual framework—an "embodied meaning"—that makes the physical object a legible structural template. This provides the permission and the necessary cognitive friction that initiates the Realization phase. Dewey, on the other hand, asks what art *does*. For him, the meaning is the realized outcome that only exists during the event of interaction, making it fluid, fluctuating, and dependent on the observer's lived experience. The physical object is an

"art product," but the "work of art" is the reciprocal, two-way loop of co-creation, where the artist provides the structural template and the viewer provides the emotional labor to re-create meaning. Danto's framework is a temporary switch that moves the object onto the path; it is Dewey's active value that provides the destination.

A person walking past a stack of Brillo boxes in a grocery store feels no "cognitive friction"; it is a mundane utility. But Danto's "transfiguration" provides the conceptual permission for the viewer to stop and look at the "commonplace" as something meaningful. In a post-historical world where anything can be art, the "commonplace" object serves as a bridge. It is a piece of the "common world" that has been organized into a "coherent form." This aligns with Dewey's idea that art must come from the "raw material" of life. The transfiguration is what allows the "live creature" to stop and engage with a fragment of reality that has been intentionally ordered. Once Danto has "transfigured" the object into art, Dewey's cycle of "doing and undergoing" begins. The ambiguity and conceptual nature of post-historical art creates cognitive friction. The viewer doesn't just look at the box; they engage with the organized form that Warhol imposed on it. This form acts as a template for the viewer's own internal "chaotic material." The transfiguration of the commonplace *object* provides the necessary framework for the transfiguration of the commonplace *life*. To engage with a transfigured commonplace object, the viewer must exercise a specific type of vision. They look at the mundane and see the profound. When the individual returns to the "common world," they have practiced the act of transfiguration themselves. The "commonplace" world around them is no longer flat or chaotic; it is now a site of

potential meaning. Transfiguration is thus a two-way street: the artist transfigures the object, and the viewer's resulting experience initiates the capacity for self-transfiguration.

This active process of co-creation and aesthetic re-creation is driven by neurobiological imperatives and evolutionary mechanics. In *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science*, Nobel laureate Eric Kandel explores the neurological phenomenon of the "beholder's share".<sup>8</sup> Coined originally by art historians Alois Riegl and Ernst Gombrich, Kandel uses this term to describe the viewer's necessary contribution to the artwork.<sup>8</sup> He demonstrates that the human brain operates as an intricate predictive mechanism that constantly seeks visual resolution and narrative closure to navigate the world. Classical, mimetic art relies heavily on "bottom-up" processing, where immediate, recognizable sensory data—such as a highly detailed Renaissance portrait—is easily categorized cognitively. However, when confronted with the ambiguous, reduced, or highly conceptual forms typical of post-historical art, the brain is biologically predisposed to reject passive reception.<sup>8</sup> To decipher the object, the brain must use higher-order cognitive functions, actively accessing the hippocampus (the center for memory) and the amygdala (the center for emotion) to project its internal life onto the work. The viewer is biologically driven to access higher-order functions, projecting their own personal memories, emotional associations, and interior life onto the artwork to reconstruct the cognitive picture and impose order on the chaos.<sup>8</sup> In this highly active

process, neural pathways fire in complex patterns that mirror the artist's original creative act.

Furthermore, neurobiology reveals that when the brain successfully resolves this top-down ambiguity—when the viewer finally synthesizes the difficult form into a coherent meaning—it releases a surge of dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with reward and pleasure.<sup>8</sup> Kandel's neurobiological framework provides a scientific analogue for the rhythm of "doing" and "undergoing" as a literal, neurological requirement to achieve a rewarding state of unified harmony. It is essential to note that while this research supports the mechanics of Realization, it does not unilaterally ratify an entire aesthetic theory, and the theoretical value of the resulting experience remains philosophically determined.

The psychological mechanism that compels the viewer to willingly engage in this arduous, cognitive-heavy process is supported by Dr. Ellen Winner in her research, *How Art Works*.<sup>18</sup> Through psychological testing, Winner provides compelling evidence that the human encounter with an artwork is fundamentally different from the encounter with a mere object, precisely because by and large we view art through an "essentialist" lens.<sup>18</sup> When an observer stands before a canvas or listens to a composition, they are not just evaluating the formal, visible properties of the medium— the specific wavelength of a red pigment or the frequency of a soundwave. Instead, they are persistently searching for the work's invisible properties: the history of its making, the deliberate effort expended, and, most crucially, the underlying *intention* of the creator. Her research

reveals that human subjects fundamentally distinguish between an image generated by a random, automated process (or an animal) and one created by an intentional human agent, even when the visual results are practically identical.<sup>18</sup> Driven by an existential necessity for human agency, we actively attempt to pierce through the physical material to reach the mind of the other. Danto identifies that the "embodied meaning" is present within the object, but Winner's research strongly suggests that the human psyche is predisposed to look for it.<sup>18</sup> The viewer does not just want a pretty picture; they want evidence of a shared subjective experience to validate their own internal realities. It is this desperate search for the intentional mind that motivates the viewer to endure the cognitive friction of the aesthetic encounter in the first place.

This idea of an "essentialist search" is increasingly threatened as AI-generated images become visually indistinguishable. If a viewer's primary drive is to locate the struggle of a human creator, AI appears to present a facade, threatening to compromise aesthetic connection. Left unguided, AI defaults to clichés. Generative AI models are trained on billions of images to find patterns. It wants to give the most statistically likely output. But the average of human emotion is a cliché, a stereotype. We know that happiness looks different on different faces. AI certainly can generate visually pleasing arrangements in what it deems to be the most conventional way. Conversely, it might just produce high-quantity, low-quality, thoughtless content—what contemporary culture accurately dismisses as "slop."<sup>11</sup> However, we have moved beyond mere aesthetics, and "slop" seems to be more an absurdity than it is art. Though, perhaps Duchamp and the Dadaists would have embraced it in that sense.

AI is not a "live creature." It does not suffer tension, it faces no mortality, and it cannot comprehend or undergo an experience; therefore, cannot generate world-affirming art in a vacuum. But the power of art is not lost in the age of AI; I believe it can be relocated when we recognize AI is not a conscious creator, but a complex, resistant medium for human creative articulation. For example, AI colorization was utilized in the reconstruction of Gustav Klimt's *Philosophy*. AI art, if it is to be art, must meet the requirement of creative friction and intention. The AI output is the new *Brillo Box*—a commonplace image transfigured into art by the presence of a conceptual framework and human intention. The creative friction, or "resistance of the medium," exists in the complex predictability *and* unpredictability of the algorithm itself.

Traditionalists dismiss this idea of friction in AI entirely, arguing an asymmetry of artistic "sweat equity." Chiseling a block of marble for four years requires a fundamentally different biological and psychological "undergoing" than typing a prompt in a chair. However, this critique conflates creative friction solely with physical labor and time passed. In the context of generative AI, the "raw, chaotic material of life" is no longer abstract; it is literal. The AI's training data is the ultimate, unfiltered jumble of human history. The artist must confront the machine's hallucinations, its frictionless, automated idea of beauty, and reject them all until it yields a unified, and satisfying resonance of their internal state. The attempt to extract anything coherent and meaningful from a machine that does not understand the meaning of the millions of

fragments it processes each second is the essence of the creative friction, and a critical source of the human touch. Out of infinite statistical possibilities, the artist recognized that *this* specific output molded the chaos into form. The artist is using AI, a fundamentally "unreal" medium—a digital simulation—to potentially facilitate a "real" experience for the viewer. In this framework, the artist's role is not to maximize physical labor, but to maximize *intentionality*. The scale of the AI artist's friction is different, but the quality of the final intentional act is what matters here.

The critique that AI art lacks the necessary "effort" to be legitimate rings hollow in a post-historical institutional art world that celebrates readymades and conceptual gestures like Maurizio Cattelan's duct-taped banana.<sup>2</sup> If a conceptual object qualifies as art through pure intentionality, we cannot hold the AI artist to an arbitrary standard. A street photographer can capture a masterpiece in a single shutter click, and an artist utilizing AI just might distill chaos into form with a prompt. In Dewey's framework, the locus of art is not the labor; it is the experience. If a human intentionally utilizes a synthetic tool to produce an impactful experience, the art is realized. The magnitude of the artist's mechanical contribution is secondary to the magnitude of the viewer's resulting resonance. Therefore, this post-historical pragmatist approach may call for a reexamination of the artist's status as well. Perhaps, we move from the artist solely as fabricator, to the artist as synthesizer, as orchestrator of experience.

Just as a viewer evaluating a photograph searches for the artist's timing, framing, and eye, the viewer of AI art searches for the intentional mind.<sup>18</sup> The critique that AI art

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A framework reliant on cognitive friction must ultimately account for the masterpiece that arrests the observer instantaneously.<sup>11</sup> How does a theory reliant on sustained struggle explain the art that induces a sudden gasp? The struggle operates at the rapid speed of neurobiology. The illusion of instantaneity is a matter of computational load. As Kandel's framework of "top-down" processing suggests, when an observer experiences this, the amygdala and visual cortex are rapidly sorting through *thousands* of emotional tags and spatial configurations in *milliseconds*.<sup>8</sup> The friction absolutely occurs, but happens so fast that it's perceived below the threshold of awareness, resulting in a sudden, massive dopamine release when the ambiguity is resolved. Furthermore, the timespan of the "undergoing" does not begin when the

observer steps into the gallery. The "live creature" arrives at the canvas already burdened with the unresolved tension, trauma, and struggle of a lived experience. When art hits instantaneously, it is not generating new cognitive friction from scratch; rather, it's instantly aligning and resolving the pre-existing, chaotic tension the viewer brought into the room.

This entire journey affirms art's enduring essentiality. It moves from conceptual object, through a biological interaction, and ends with a regeneration of the subject. The "End of Art" did not kill art, nor reduce it to radical subjectivity. Instead, it can be viewed as marking art's reclamation of its purpose as a vital tool for living, now armed with the self-awareness to organize our chaotic reality with deliberate intention. In life, two extremes often tear us apart. The past weighs us down as we ruminate on mistakes made or are consumed by the nostalgia of childhood. At the same time, an anxious future lingers as we dread aging into the unknown. Our mind is stretched between an unchangeable past and an uncontrollable future, rarely inhabiting the present. Dewey states, "Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive."<sup>4</sup> Successful Realization provides an intense form of experience and equilibrium. Our memories and subconscious associations provide the fuel necessary to navigate the Beholder's Share, resolving the past's tensions, while they transform anxieties into anticipation. The intensity of the engagement forces consciousness into the immediacy of the present, achieving what Dewey describes as the "quickenings of what now is".<sup>4</sup> This unified focus represents a defining moment of our capacity for living, found in art.

Through this, art becomes a vital form of communication because it addresses the limitations of ordinary language. While language can only describe an emotion using abstract symbols, leaving us often trapped in subjective interpretations, art provides a structural form that directly induces the experience. A poet transforms the messy, devastating fog of grief into a beautiful elegy. A composer orchestrates random, discordant sounds into a unifying symphony. Art takes life's overwhelm and makes it temporarily manageable. After an experience of this kind, the active observer steps back into the ordinary world with a heightened capacity for living. Through struggling with the artist's intention and resolving the medium's tension, meaning is re-created and integrated. Through deliberate effort, they used the transfigured object to actively transfigure themselves. They emerge more connected to life, and more attuned to the world beyond themselves. Realization remains an essentially human experience because the ultimate value—the transformation, connection, and restorative harmony—is only intelligible to the "live creature" capable of tension and mortality. While AI acts as a sophisticated, resistant medium, the final, culminating experience of Realization is found *by* the human, *for* the human, and *within* the human. When Realization is successful, it *elevates* the human to the threshold of a "transcendent" experience—one grounded in the peak functional capacity of the "live creature" fully united with its environment.

### **3. TRANSCENDENCE: The Last Man, and The World**

After enduring the cognitive friction of Realization—the mental labor of the “beholder’s share” required to resolve ambiguity and synthesize sensory data into a coherent meaning—the observer achieves a hard-won equilibrium. They stand at the final threshold of the art experience: Transcendence. In this context, it is not a mystical departure from reality; rather, it is defined here as a naturalistic, grounded expansion of the subject's internal boundaries. The concept of a "Naturalistic Transcendence" might appear paradoxical at first glance; however, I will clarify further within the framework of this section.<sup>4,6</sup>

If Danto is correct that art has reached the end of its historical progression, it mirrors the cultural mood popularized by political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 thesis *The End of History*.<sup>5</sup> This is no coincidence. Both Danto and Fukuyama drew their conclusions directly from the dialectical framework of Hegel, arguing that once human consciousness reaches its ultimate state of conceptual self-awareness, the historical timeline of struggle is often declared to effectively end. Fukuyama argued that following the fall of the Berlin Wall, humanity had seemingly reached the endpoint of its ideological evolution, settling into a pervasive, if not permanent, state of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Yet, when the grand, driving narratives of historical struggle collapse into a comfortable, perpetual present, humanity potentially faces a chronic spiritual threat. Without a great conflict or higher purpose to forge

meaning, we face the temptation of devolving into the archetype that German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche warned would be the "Last Man."<sup>13</sup>

Nietzsche foresaw the looming threat of nihilism on a grand scale following the decline of traditional religion and objective truth in the 19th-century. He defined the Last Man as a creature consumed entirely by complacency. Having eradicated the struggles that once defined humanity, the Last Man desires only comfort and the absence of friction. They invent nothing, they risk nothing, and they seek only the easily digestible pleasures. As Nietzsche noted with chilling foresight, the Last Man merely "blinks" blankly at the world, mistaking a lack of suffering for genuine happiness. In this context, hyper-consumer culture emerges as a highly effective medium for the Last Man, as our modern conveniences are engineered specifically to eliminate struggle. They provide the Last Man with exactly what he desires: instant, unearned gratification without the terrifying vulnerability of encountering another human mind. Therefore, in the post-historical world, we are not just arguing about whether AI is "real art." Or whether or not you understand the meaning of a conceptual piece. The stakes can be raised to the survival of meaning and the human spirit. Out of art's many functions, its most urgent may be to aggressively reintroduce the tension that the Last Man desperately tries to avoid, forcing them to confront the terrifying, extraordinary depth of their own humanity.

Immanuel Kant, a towering figure of the Enlightenment, did not just contribute to the study of Aesthetics with his *Critique of Judgment* (1790);<sup>9</sup> he is often credited

with formally inaugurating it as an autonomous philosophical discipline. Kant proposed a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy, arguing that the mind does not passively absorb the external world; it actively structures it. Kant built an epistemological wall of knowledge, separating human perception from the "thing-in-itself" (the objective, unknowable *Noumenal* world).<sup>9</sup> For Kant, this is the "Transcendental." He argued that we can only ever interact with our own mental representations (the perceived, *Phenomenal* world).<sup>9</sup> In contemporary discourse, postmodern theorists expanded this gap between what we perceive and objective truth, stretching it to its limits to argue that if objective reality is inaccessible, then all truth and meaning are entirely subjective constructs. However, laying the cynical and deconstructive relativism of the postmodern condition at Kant's feet is deeply uncharitable. If one is familiar with his ethical framework, it is clear that he was far from a relativist. Kant built this wall to save human freedom, restricting what we could know in order to make room for what we must believe. By establishing the boundaries of pure reason, he sought to protect the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life from the encroaching determinism of empirical science. But it came at the cost of metaphysical connection. While they accepted Kant's premise that the mind actively structures experience, the early German Romantics found his impenetrable barrier between the phenomenal surface and the noumenal depth to be deeply alienating. Thinkers like F.W.J. Schelling refused to accept that human beings were permanently severed from ultimate reality. For the Romantics, "transcendence" became a central, heroic project of bridging that epistemological gap. They argued that art, rather than abstract logic, was viewed as a primary route to

understanding what cannot be rationally calculated—a bridge designed to unite the inner soul with the outer world.

To make this framework function in the post-historical age, we must present these metaphysical aspirations as consistent with our biological and psychological reality, wherein the *noumenal* can be reframed as not an inaccessible realm outside of the physical universe. But instead, the depths of the human condition that cold empirical logic cannot fully articulate. It is the felt reality of human emotion and our connection to the environment. This transition is what John Dewey accomplished, taking the Romantic goal of healing the split between the inner self and the outer world and grounding it entirely in a naturalistic reality. For Dewey, the split is healed through maximizing the individual's felt connection with their environment and the process of lived experience. When Dewey quotes the Romantic poet John Keats to discuss forging "ethereal things" in the second chapter of *Art as Experience*, he is pulling the Romantic concept of transcendence down from the heavens and planting it in the soil of human experience.

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This awakening aligns with the views of Hegel, who defined Romantic art as the "self-transcendence of art within its own sphere." Hegel argued that Classical art, in its pursuit of perfection, was ultimately inadequate for the modern era. Classical beauty is finite, but the subjective inner life of the human spirit is infinite. The statue has clear boundaries and edges; but as human consciousness evolved, our internal lives became infinitely complex, messy, and self-aware. Hegel realized that a perfectly smooth, symmetrical piece of marble may be viewed as too "small" and too "perfect" to contain the infinite depth of the modern human soul. Therefore, art had to stretch, distort, and eventually fracture its own perfection to make the invisible visible. To show the infinite soul, the artist has to push the physical medium to its absolute breaking point. We see this in the work of Caspar David Friedrich, the 19th-century German Romantic painter renowned for his mastery of overwhelming landscapes. In works like *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* or *The Monk by the Sea*, Friedrich does not just paint nature; he paints the terrifying boundary between the finite human and the infinite void. By placing a solitary, dwarfed figure against an unfathomable expanse of endless, dark water, Friedrich denies the viewer a safe, contained object.

The Sublime is perhaps the most potent artistic tool on a wider spectrum of cognitive and existential friction, operating as a shock. However, it is important to understand that it is not the only gateway to a world-affirming experience. A simple acoustic song, a minimalist painting, or a quiet poem are still deeply human, requiring cognitive friction in their own right. The Sublime's function, therefore, must evolve. Today, the unfathomable ocean may be replaced by the paralyzing volume of

information, and the incomprehensible speed of algorithms. The modern equivalent is an endless feed to scroll. A contemporary post-historical artist takes this paralyzing flow of digital noise and forces it into a localized human meaning.<sup>11</sup>

After surviving the Sublime, we enter what can be described as a key development in the contemporary cultural paradigm: *Metamodernism* (also referred to as *Post-Postmodernism*).<sup>19</sup> This emerging cultural theory, which is intended to succeed the postmodern cultural condition, is defined by an oscillation between the sincerity, hope, and grand narratives of Modernism and the irony, skepticism, and deconstruction of Postmodernism. This paradigm shifts away from the detached irony that writer David Foster Wallace warned had become paralyzing, demanding a courageous return to active, hopeful construction. Some of its defining traits include *informed naivety*—the choice to believe in meaningful narratives despite knowing their apparent absurdities—and *ironic sincerity*, the act of shifting rapidly between Modern earnestness and Postmodern mockery. These traits appear as paradoxes because they require the observer to navigate the tensions between hope and skepticism, construction and deconstruction, seriousness and playfulness. An act that forces the observer's mind to hold two opposing truths simultaneously.

Metamodern traits are increasingly visible in contemporary culture, where art rebels by dissolving genre boundaries, mashing together elements that logically should not fit. This rebellion could be understood through Nietzsche's dichotomy of the *Apollonian* (structure, language, logic, and mathematical boundaries) and the

*Dionysian* (chaotic emotion and vital life force).<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche argued that genuine art, particularly Greek tragedy, was itself a synthesis of these opposing forces.<sup>12</sup> Metamodern art is often characterized by their violent collision, creating a "beautiful noise" where chaos and order are intentionally fused. We hear this in the music of Aphex Twin, whose catalog oscillates between serene ambient soundscapes and abrasive, experimental IDM. We also hear this in the Shoegaze genre of the 90s, where devastatingly gorgeous, *Apollonian* melodies are deliberately buried under blown-out, *Dionysian* walls of guitar distortion and reverb. An overwhelming wall of sound that induces a trance-like state in the listener, oscillating beautifully and violently between swirling chaos and swooning vulnerability. A paradox that forces the listener's brain to hold conflicting truths simultaneously, demanding the cognitive labor to find the humanity hidden within the noise. Ralph Waldo Emerson, leader of the American Transcendentalist Movement, believed that genuine intellectual and spiritual growth requires the courage to contradict oneself.<sup>1</sup> The human spirit is a dynamic, evolving force that thrives on the friction of its own paradoxes. Nietzsche idolized Emerson's embrace of contradiction, eventually synthesizing it into his most inspiring philosophical ideal of *Amor Fati* (Latin: the love of one's fate).<sup>13</sup> We see this paradox manifested in the flesh and blood of Nietzsche himself, who forged and embodied it from the crucible of his own agonizing illness. To truly love life is to look at its terrifying, magical, messy, and deeply contradictory nature—including the inevitability of suffering and death—then boldly say "Yes" to it anyway.

The Hip-Hop icon Kanye West provides a particularly compelling example of this paradox. Musically, culturally, and personally, he is a walking collision of immense artistic influence buried under a mountain of ego-driven noise.<sup>20</sup> His discography shifts wildly between the bleeding vulnerability of *808s & Heartbreak* and the harsh aggression of *Yeezus*. Yet, the crystallization of this Metamodern synthesis is found on the cover of his 2018 album, *Ye*. Against the backdrop of jagged Wyoming mountains is a hastily scrawled phrase: "*I hate being Bi-Polar it's awesome.*"<sup>19</sup> It holds opposing truths in the exact same breath: agony and ecstasy, deep vulnerability and massive ego. It is like projecting the messy, physically perishable self directly against the infinite abyss of nature. West is a complicated figure, but when faced with this paradox of an artist, the Last Man either blindly worships him, or dismisses him entirely because the contradiction is too uncomfortable to bear. The aesthetic value of such art is not in romanticizing suffering, instability, or a clinical condition. It is, rather, better viewed as documenting the unpolished human striving for synthesis—the heroic act of creating a conscious affirmation from chaos. Because West operates at the intersection of popular art, massive commerce, and genuine struggle, his work forces a massive audience to actively engage with the paradoxical nature of affirmation rather than retreating into the safety of detachment. His work reveals the human being to be: a terrifying, beautiful, twisted, striving, coherent mess.

In his *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), Aristotle drew a fundamental distinction between the historian and the poet (the artist).<sup>7</sup> History, he argued, records what has happened—the contingent reality of what *was* and what *is*. Art, however, projects the

universal, a moral ideal of what *could* and *should* (the ought) be, by constructing it into a "convincing reality." Meaning, the world created by the artist, though idealized, is believable and convincing to the audience; it is not to teach, but to show. It does this by taking the most abstract concepts—like uncompromising virtue or individual potential—and translating them into a concrete form, bringing them into immediate perceptual awareness. These Aristotelian principles are the explicit source for the author Ayn Rand's theory on art in the *Romantic Manifesto* (1969).<sup>15</sup> While critics often completely dismiss her work as polemic, and ideologically rigid, the value of her theory to this framework need not rely on adopting the entire philosophical system. Instead, I find her work in aesthetics provides a highly potent conceptualization of *volition* necessary to combat the threat of the Last Man. Beneath her often abrasive exterior is a fiercely sincere, deeply moving vision of the uncompromising triumph of individual human potential.<sup>15</sup> *The Romantic Manifesto* (1969) was published just five years after Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964), positioning Rand's work as a post-historical attempt to re-establish a singular, universal purpose for art after its historical purpose *ended*.

Rand revered the 19th-century Romantic movement for its recognition of human volition. Romanticism was a counter-reaction to the Enlightenment's overemphasis on cold, abstract reason. Unlike purely deterministic frameworks that view humans as helpless products of their environment, the Romantics understood that individuals possess the free will to choose their values, projecting a grand, heroic vision of humanity. The Romantics elevated volition and emotion over rationality and logic, essentially prioritizing the chaotic *Dionysian* over the ordered *Apollonian*. Rand's goal

was to resolve this historical tension by developing a synthesis that retained the movement's heroic vision of humanity while supplying the rational structure necessary to ground that ideal in reality. While many Romantics were politically engaged and sought to forge their ideals in the real world, Rand criticized the movement for structural pessimism. She argued that in radically rejecting rationality, the movement often lacked the necessary philosophical foundation to believe its heroic ideals could actually be achieved in reality, leading a segment of the movement to retreat into escapism. Her synthesis of Romantic vision and rational structure, by contrast, takes Aristotle's "convincing reality" and applies it directly to everyday life. Rand recognized that revolutionary shifts must begin with a moral revolution within each individual, arguing that because human beings rely on immaterial abstractions, we possess a biological need to bring those concepts into immediate perceptual awareness. This is the impenetrable wall separating the mind from reality that Kant (whom Rand absolutely despises) established, and which centuries earlier, the German Romantic poet Novalis identified as a sickness. Novalis then declared that "the poet is the transcendental physician"—<sup>14</sup> meaning art alone can bypass the limitations of abstract logic and translate those lofty, immaterial ideals into a felt, concrete reality that the observer's mind can fully grasp, connecting the inner self to the outer world. By fulfilling the need to see their abstractions made perceptually real, art provides the individual with a "convincing reality" of what human life *could* and *should* be. The viewer experiences their own heroic potential as a concrete, felt possibility. This necessity for translating

ideals into concrete reality is the means by which art projects Aristotle's "ought," that Rand interprets as the volitional demand of the individual.

In our post-historical era, this "ought" can be understood as a self-chosen worldview imposed onto the chaos. The observer is searching for evidence of human agency and intentionality—the struggle to impose values on an indifferent world. Because this projected ideal becomes internally structured and believable, art challenges the notion that it serves only an escape from reality. This chosen "ought" can be a form of revolt because it represents the assertion of individual creative power in defiance of the indifference of the universe. The cognitive friction of the aesthetic encounter provides the impetus for the choice to affirm a personal “ought” that sparks an internal moral revolution.<sup>46</sup>

This is the engine of the early German Romantic concept of *Bildung* —the lifelong tradition of rigorous self-cultivation and deliberate shaping of one's own soul. Novalis identified this never-ending process, famously declaring that "life must not be a novel that is given to us, but one that is made by us."<sup>14</sup> This concept is evident in the life of American Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller. Nineteenth-century society handed Fuller a restrictive, pre-written script of what a woman should be, and she rejected it—teaching herself the classics, translating the German writings of Goethe (whose work defined the Bildungsroman literary genre), and hosting her famous Conversations to encourage women to cultivate their independent minds. The climactic demonstration of her convictions occurred on her way home from a transatlantic voyage, when her ship

ran aground in a hurricane off the coast of New York.<sup>6</sup> She faced the literal terror of the Sublime. As the ship broke apart, witnesses reported that she sat calmly in a nightgown, refusing rescue if it meant abandoning her partner and young son. They tragically drowned in the storm, but it could not break the moral resolve and unshakeable volition she had spent a lifetime cultivating.<sup>6</sup> To the pessimistic mindset of the Last Man, her death can be seen as meaningless—the inevitable conclusion of a completely deterministic world. To the volitional individual, however, the encounter with the Sublime can transform into an affirmation: the defiant choice to look into the face of death and consciously say "Yes" to one's fate. Thus, within the self-cultivation of *Bildung*, perhaps the greatest artwork becomes the design of the life actually lived.

A jump from private, internal volition to public, civic action is admittedly more an idealized, ethical aspiration than an automatic certainty. Yet, the aesthetic encounter cultivates the specific sensitivity that makes this aspiration possible. By successfully navigating the cognitive friction of a profound artwork, the observer intimately connects not just with the shared human condition, but with the shared, transcendental capacity for consciousness itself. The victory of the Sublime, as previously explored, is the realization that the mind holds the concept of the infinite. When this realization occurs, the individual may be inspired to believe that this volitional capacity is universal, embedded in the very structure of human consciousness. This universal potential for *Bildung* and value-creation—the antithesis of the Last Man—inspires a sense of moral responsibility to protect and nurture that capacity in others. This disposition, rooted in shared aesthetic experience, cultivates the specific sensitivity that serves as a foundation

for reciprocal civic action. As Fuller argued, a fully realized individual returns to society with a heightened sensitivity to the need for this reciprocity with the world. One does not transcend out of the ordinary world; rather, consciousness is intended to be expanded so that one may operate with a heightened disposition within it.

The trajectory—progressing through Aesthetics, Realization, and Transcendence—demonstrates that art in the post-historical age has finally awakened to its existential purpose. We no longer rely on art merely to document history, map physical reality, or iterate upon formal, stylistic boundaries. Art is a sophisticated utilization of the biological capacity for survival and meaning-making. It may serve as a metaphorical defibrillator for the human spirit. The journey of the spirit can be interpreted as the natural mechanism by which human beings metabolize the chaos of reality into meaning.<sup>4</sup> Engaging with profound art is not an isolated event confined to the gallery or the concert hall; it is the beginning of an internal reordering. The active observer who has been fractured by the Sublime, challenged by the beautiful noise, and reconstructed through the rigorous extraction of meaning is equipped to evolve. They depart with a vastly expanded capacity for living. They return to the chaotic, chronological world with a heightened capacity for reciprocity, and a refusal to passively accept the broken reality of the present because the aesthetic experience has given them a taste of the infinite. This aspirational moral reciprocity, born from individual volition, is the ethical counter-thesis to the Last Man. The enduring significance of art in the

algorithmic age is that it transfigures the individual, and the fully realized, transcendent individual is empowered to transform their world.

## Endnotes

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2. Cattelan, Maurizio. *Comedian* (Exhibition Note). Art Basel Miami, 2019. This reference is explicitly used in Section 2 to ground the argument that conceptual gestures, validated by pure intentionality over physical "sweat equity," establish a post-historical precedent for evaluating AI art as a human-directed medium.
3. Danto, Arthur C. *What Art Is*. Yale UP, 2013.
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5. Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992.
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