

Spring 2023

Art and the Inescapable Spell of Mimesis

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Recommended Citation

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Art and the Inescapable Spell of Mimesis

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

Dedication

To my every living moment, you wrote this essay. I just typed the words.

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Preface

Mimesis was once obvious in art. Art that Plato linked to the concept of mimesis was entirely figurative and evidently mimetic of reality. However, as art paces into abstraction, conceptual art, or installations, the portion of mimesis seems obsolete with the exclusion of figuration. Plato and Aristotle's proposal that art is mimetic seems outmoded, along with their strict rules of what passes as art. I argue that although the philosophers' identification of art is out-of-date, their claim that art is mimetic is still valid in the contemporary context. One might ask, for instance, how is Marina Abramovic's performance mimetic? What are Piet Modrian's *Compositions* mimicking since they are merely color stripes on a white canvas? Why is conceptual art mimetic? I will not answer those questions directly, but in this essay, I will prove that art can not derail from a mimetic path, as Plato and Aristotle claim, and provide a general guide on why and how a piece of art is mimetic and what it is mimetic of. I hope one will be able to come up with some answers to those questions after reading this essay.

There are two chapters in this essay. The first is on Marshall McLuhan's theory, *Medium is the Message*, a concept that assists my proof in the second chapter on mimesis' unavoidable presence in art.

Chapter 1: Medium

It is quite fortunate that the term *medium* employed by Marshall McLuhan's famous theory, *the medium is the message*, smoothly translates into the art realm. As an art vocabulary, it indicates the tools and materials used in a piece of art. It is usually the first thing one notices

when encountering a work of art—this is a painting, a sculpture, or a photo. However, the *medium* in McLuhan’s theory is more comprehensive in application to art: not only does it indicate the usual meaning of the material, but also any context that a piece of art is based on. As significant as historical happenings, political shifts, religions, and cultures and as trivial as personal encounters, family traditions, and a random trance of thought are all mediums that have influenced and even driven the progression of art. The imprints of each happening in a piece of art are still traceable—its message is eternally preserved. Both the physical and contextual mediums will be exemplified in this chapter as I chronologically talk through art history and examine the mediums that initiated notable changes in art, usually marked with the beginning of a new movement or aesthetics.

I will first introduce McLuhan’s theory in relevance to the topic. Then I will present five cases in which a new medium emerges, and its message is presented in triggering a historical tipping point in the art. The five emerging mediums are the portable canvas, the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church (the Baroque), WWI (Dadaism), reproductive images, and video. Their alignment with McLuhan’s theory would validate my statement that the progression of art is involuntarily driven by the emergence of new physical or historical mediums. A new medium is not a vessel that inherits the existing properties of art but which develops its own subject, aesthetics, and purpose as its messages. With such ground firmly established, I will highlight two significance of applying McLuhan’s theory in art.

1.1 Medium is the Message

The renowned chapter “Medium is the message” is from Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964. 1964 was a time, as any time since the 1700s, when the rapid development of technology was both exciting and concerning. In light of his theory, McLuhan’s observations on the technologies and the profound changes they caused would be the medium that pumped him to write the book. He defines his theory *Medium is the Message* in the very first paragraph: “[t]his is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology”¹. The sinuated sentence implies that the cause of any personal or social changes can be traced to the introduction of a new medium. A medium could be an extension of ourselves or any new technology. In a later passage, he defines that “[f]or the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs”². The two keywords and the theory are hereby defined: the medium is any extension of ourselves, and the changes it causes are its message. The definition is immediately exemplified with automation.

Automation is a medium whose message is that it changes the patterns of human association. It replaces workers, therefore, eliminates their jobs; however, new jobs to maintain automation sequentially appears. Although workers remained working, automation has changed all three dimensions of human affairs, as McLuhan concludes, scale, pattern, and pace. It substantially speeds up the production process, causing growth in the production scale. It changes the pattern of the workers’ involvement in their work. Eventually, the increased scale of

¹ McLuhan, Marshall, 1911-1980. *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet Books, 1966, 20.

² McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 20.

production led to a boost in the pace of industrial development. Automation is a perfect medium to clarify the concept, as its message is irrefutable and impossible to underestimate while also proving that the content is not significant.

McLuhan surmises that an opposing point of view would propose that a medium is neutral in nature; how a medium is manipulated determines the outcome. He quotes General David Sarnoff's statement, "We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value"³ and calls it the "voice of the current somnambulism"⁴.

To fully reject statements as such, McLuhan is compelled to introduce the term *content*, which, with medium, completes the duality of most objects. The content of automation could be the production of cars, clothes, or spoons, and the content of a painting could be of a landscape or a person. For General David Sarnoff, the content is the essential element that bears the message, while the medium is merely a device to carry it out. On the contrary, the specificity of the content could not be less significant for McLuhan; he thinks of content as a distraction from what is really substantial, the medium. He points out, "In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs"⁵. This is to say that no matter what the content of the automation might be, the fact that it induces tremendous changes in how society works is undeniable, rendering the content irrelevant in conducting such a message.

³ McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 22.

⁴ McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 22.

⁵ McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 20.

Moving on to the theory's application in art, McLuhan acknowledges that "Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that the medium is the message"⁶. He analyzes that Cubist painters decided to shift the focus from the subject of the painting (the content) to the painting (the medium) itself. Cubism stands at the mid-point of this painting ideology; the evolution started with impressionism and was completed with abstract art or minimalism. Cubism is the mid-point between the two, both chronologically and visually. The application of McLuhan's theory in art is more substantial than he believed in; such as it explains why this ideology of painting initially started, as I will explain later.

To clarify, although it is not directly dealt with in his passages due to the general negligence and contempt for *content*, McLuhan does not indicate that a medium's message necessarily overwrites the content's message. The invention of dishwashers would be a case for it. The same dishes need to be washed (the content), no matter whether by machines or people, but the invention of dishwashers (the medium) changes the speed that the dishes are washed (the message). However, I believe that McLuhan is more eager to point out that a medium can discover its own content, and there are countless cases to support it. For example, the invention of electricity (the medium) changes every aspect of our lives (the message) and serves as a foundation for all electrical products (the created content). The cases in the art can also exemplify the latter view.

Since the message is the change of scale, pace, or pattern⁷ caused by a medium, and since the medium is the message; therefore, the medium causes changes. When the theory is applied to art, the aspects of change should be specified according to the dimensions of art. What is to art as scale, pace, and pattern are to society? It is difficult to pin any definitions down for the vast

⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 25.

⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 20.

material *art* subsumes. Let us assume for now that the message of a medium in art is the change of subject, aesthetics/style, and purpose, among other dimensions of art. Aesthetics and style parallel each other, for they are both terms to describe an appreciated sense of beauty. The former is more flexibly applied, while the latter requires a historical acknowledgment⁸.

1.2 McLuhan in the Light of Art History

a. Mobile Paintings

When anyone is asked to picture a painting, almost undoubtedly, the image that appears in one's mind is a canvas mounted on a shelf or a wall, possibly the *Mona Lisa* or *Starry Night*; This was not always the representative of painting. Before the Renaissance (14th Century), paintings were done on walls, ceilings, or *permanent surfaces*; such paintings are reconceptualized and are known as mural paintings after the unseen extension of their original term.

The physical restraint of mural painting shaped its subject and aesthetics. As the painters faced nothing but an immense surface, the subject of the paintings was much confined to religious illustrations. As there were no models to reference for the portraiture, the physicality of the religious figures depicted in the paintings was highly unnatural and stiff in a flat, golden background. These characteristics are featured in the pre-Renaissance movement, the Italo-Byzantine style. During the Renaissance, paintings began to be done on portable surfaces, which completely erased the characteristics of a mural. When mobility is added to the

⁸ Such as the identifiable works in romanticism or realism.

pre-Renaissance definition of painting, a new medium is formed, which contains several messages.

The mobility of a canvas, along with another medium that is the historical background of artists and literates challenging the church, substantially extends the subject of paintings. From exclusively religious illustrations, the painters were able to take the canvas outside and paint landscapes—a shift from painting from imagination to painting from a real-life reference. Encyclopedia Britannica states, “although paintings from the earliest ancient and Classical periods included natural scenic elements, landscape as an independent genre did not emerge in the Western tradition until the Renaissance in the 16th century”⁹. It was exactly the emergence of this medium that initiated the growing genre in art known as landscape painting.

Portable canvases also made a naturalistic approach to figures possible, which was later crowned as the most renowned characteristic of the Renaissance. Not only did landscape become a popular reference for painting, but also people. Propelled by an intellectual wave of humanism, individual artists escaped their religious duty and painted their subjects in an approach to realism. Unlike the Italo-Byzantine style, with identical faces rigidly seated on a rounded shape representing the body, the figures during the Renaissance were rendered vividly expressive in their gestures and facial expressions, interacting with one another in a story-inciting way. The figures' bodies suggest mass and volume, which were situated in front of a realistic landscape instead of on a golden plain in religious paintings¹⁰. The shift of style and aesthetic approach is unobstructed due to the mobility of canvases: the painters can simply look up from a canvas and see the posed models.

⁹ Blumberg, N.. "landscape painting." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 3, 2020.
<https://www.britannica.com/art/landscape-painting>.

¹⁰ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Renaissance art." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 19, 2022.
<https://www.britannica.com/art/Renaissance-art>.

A third change a portable canvas induced was that it allowed commissioned portrait paintings to exist and become more prevalent. As W.J.T Mitchell states in his *Critical Terms For Media Studies*, portable canvases “free[d] [the paintings] from their muralistic attachment to architecture and transforming them into movable property, commodities to be exchanged and sold and copied in the new industry of reproductive engraving”¹¹. It was an efficient expansion of the art market; although still exclusive to the rich and prominent, it is deemed to be the beginning of circulable images.

It is clear, then, that what seems to be a small innovation has caused an unforeseen shift in the development of art. By inserting mobility into mural painting and forming *painting* in contemporary understanding, transformations were found in art's style, subject, and market. The medium has a powerful message which facilitated all aspects of the Renaissance.

b. The Baroque

The baroque art movement started in the historical moment when the Catholic Church directed a Counter-Reformation against the rising Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century. The church encouraged the artists to make art that appealed to the ordinary people and evoked their reverence and awe of the church. This command, an extension of religion into art, is the medium that initiated the Baroque movement and drove the unique style for which Baroque art is known. As Britannica defines,

“[t]he Baroque style that evolved from this program was paradoxically both sensuous and spiritual; while a naturalistic treatment rendered the religious image more accessible to the average churchgoer, dramatic and illusory effects were used to stimulate piety and devotion and convey an impression of the splendour of the divine”¹²

¹¹ Mitchell, W. J. Thomas, and Mark B. N Hansen. *Critical Terms For Media Studies*. University Of Chicago Press, 2010, 38.

¹² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Baroque art and architecture." Encyclopedia Britannica, October 6, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Baroque-art-and-architecture>.

In response to the Counter-Reformation and its command, the Baroque painters, with Caravaggio as the leader, employed a new technique known as *tenebrism*, which features highlighted figures on a dark background.

At this point, it is essential to point out that the identity as medium and content is constantly interchangeable and overlapped; as McLuhan Points out, “[t]his fact, characteristic of all media, means that the content of any medium is always another medium”¹³. McLuhan’s example is that telegram is a medium whose content is print, which is a medium whose content is writing, whose content is speech. Each of these media is the content of another medium, which holds its own messages. Closely aligned to his description, in this case, Church’s command is the medium, whose content is the Baroque art, whose content is tenebrism, whose content is a spotlighted figure in a dark background, which transmits awe and reverence to the viewers.

The effect of the looped mediums is as such: the dramatic contrast created by this technique became an eye-catching element for its audiences, which were used to seeing the toned-down, beautified images of Mannerism, achieving its role to appeal to the common churchgoers. The theatrical composition of a lonely figure in the vast darkness, eager to come to light, is also set up to convey a sense of divinity easily.

The development of this technique is a direct response to the call of the Church. Bearing the Church’s command in mind, the painters offered a new aesthetic for the people and left their message in history.

c. Dadaism

Like Counter-Reformation was to Baroque art, World War I was the medium for Dadaism. The social climate of Europe after WWI was shrouded by a sense of nihilism, which

¹³ McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 20.

extended into the realm of art and spurred the rise of Dadaism. The denial of the war and the nationalism that many deemed led to it is reflected in Dadaism, as Dadaist artists denied the authority of *art*. Dadaists marked themselves as anti-art and rejected all definitions of existing art. They refused to deal with politics, societal changes, or any aesthetics and styles valued in art in the past and erased all meanings out of art, exactly in the way that they are lost in how they could deal with the traumatized post-war environment. The nihilist attitude on the surface is actively rebellious in nature, for the artists did not cease to make art but were more fevered in revolutionizing it. Ready-made was the product of this combination. Founded upon controversy, the artists announced that everyday objects could be presented as art. The action can almost be seen as a therapeutic catharsis of the rage toward the war by intentionally messing up what has been carefully constructed in the realm of art, “turn[ing] the known into the unknown”¹⁴. In this case, the message was intended to be as destructive as the medium. However, the unique nature of art devours deconstruction and converts it into pure innovation and energy—one that is unprecedented and can never be replicated. The irreproducible level of innovation is what really doomed art to its devastation, which I will discuss further in the second chapter, where Dadaism draws the line between modernism and contemporary art.

d. Reproductive Images: Lithography and Photography

Returning to circulable images, the invention of artistic media, lithography and photography, took reproductive images to the next level. In the chapter “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin demonstrated the tremendous shifts in art caused by the emergence of the medium lithography and photography. Lithography is a form of printmaking, a field dedicated to the fast multiplication of images. It has a different

¹⁴ Artincontext. “Dadaism – What Is the Meaning of the Meaninglessness of Dada Art?” artincontext.org, March 3, 2022. <https://artincontext.org/dadaism/>.

chemical process to etching or woodblock; it can reproduce images that are simply drawn onto the stone plate instead of incising or engraving them. This has facilitated the speed and breadth of the subject that can be reproduced. As Benjamin states, the invention of lithography allows “illustrated accompaniment to everyday life”¹⁵. In other words, it changed the scale of art in society and made art more accessible and available to people of its time.

However, although it still holds artistic value as a medium, its function as a reproductive device became obsolete when photography was succeedingly invented in 1826. As many would have observed, the invention of photography turned the art world upside down, for it has freed other art forms from their primary duty of imitating and documenting reality. Photography has driven painting from Realism to Impressionism (1860) and forced printmaking to find artistic values outside its reproductive mission—in short, its existence initiated the great Modernism. Although this is not intended in the invention process, history has shown us that the emergence of a new medium induced revolutionary changes in art.

Although photography was a medium invented to capture reality, it gradually gained an artistic value as to how photography is viewed today—in its message, a unique aesthetic is derived. Benjamin states, “Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes”¹⁶. On top of accomplishing its purpose of precise reproduction, cameras involuntarily developed into a device with value in aesthetic manipulation. Benjamin gives two premises that caused this development: the first is the unique technicality of a camera and the second from bringing the reproduced

¹⁵ Benjamin, Walter, et al. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2008, 20.

¹⁶ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 21.

image to a place where it could not happen. I will emphasize the first point considering the focus of this essay. Benjamin proposes that the lens works differently from our eyes and can capture a reality that was obscured for us before, such as slow motion, enlargement, long exposures, etc. The visual novelty created by these methods specialized in photography wins its place in the art world, especially in its time when art is primarily visually based. This has shown that the technicality of photography, as a medium, has developed its own aesthetics. The medium not only inherited the job of paintings and printmaking to reproduce an image but also gave birth to a whole new field of art and distinctive aesthetics.

W.J.T. Mitchell makes a similar point regarding reproducing images by new technologies in the chapter “Image.” Mitchell concludes that “[t]he invention of new means of image production and reproduction, from the stamping of coins to the printing press to lithography, photography, film, video, and digital imaging, is often accompanied by a widespread perception that a ‘pictorial turn’ is taking place, often with the prediction of disastrous consequences for culture”¹⁷. It is highlighted again that the emergence of a new medium evokes great changes, and in some cultural contexts, a “pictorial turn” is rather unsettling. This is not to say that the new reproductive tools are evil, but their progressing ability to simulate reality is constantly unorthodox to cultural and religious traditions.

He gives the example of biocybernetics as a way of creating new images. Biocybernetics is a new scientific technology for creating *clones*. Its uncanniness and uniqueness intrigued artists and diverted them into the art, turning it into a field in art known as *biomedia*. It’s even more unsettling than before when such a powerful technology is considered a method of image-making. Mitchell points out, “[c]loning has reawakened all the ancient phobias and taboos

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Critical Terms For Media Studies*, 37.

regarding the creation of images because it seems quite literally to introduce the prospect of “playing God” by taking over the role of making creatures”¹⁸. Yet, despite the stir in traditions, the controversies upon a medium could only win its popularity and attention. The images produced by the medium still won their place in art history and maintained consistent conversations until now.

In Mitchell’s observations, he finds that “when a new medium makes possible new kinds of images, often more lifelike and persuasive than ever before, and seemingly more volatile and virulent, as if images were dangerous microbes that could infect the minds of their consumers”¹⁹. From lithography to photography, digital manipulation to biocybernetics, no mediums are accepted as they created quite a stir. However, setting aside all cultural and ethical questions, the strong responses each medium gets, no matter whether it’s rejection or excitement, is only proof of the revolutionary changes it has caused. The intention of reproducing images is inherited, and the intention is part of the content, but it is clear that each medium has revolutionized the definition of the field and inserted its technological particularity into the content of the art itself.

e. Videos

The last case I will share is the medium of video and the message it conducted in Laura U. Marks’ observation. In her essay “Video Haptics and Erotics,” she suggests that video is a medium that can be manipulated to communicate an unprecedented sense of haptics and erotics, which appeals to Marks a lot. Marks directly suggests that video, in its medium, gives birth to a new aesthetic and a realm of works. She lists two films that successfully conjured her feeling of haptic and erotic, and attributes the cause of this effect to a unique way of manipulating the medium. The first film is *It Wasn’t Love* (1992) by Sadie Benning. Marks describes a scene

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Critical Terms For Media Studies*, 37.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *Critical Terms For Media Studies*, 38.

where “Benning slowly sucks her thumb, inches away from the unfocusable, low-resolution camera. Yet watching the tape feels like going on a journey into states of erotic being”²⁰. It is exactly the designed vagueness and the low resolution of the visual that conveys the unique feeling that Marks attained. It is the blurred boundaries between the characters in the film caused by the blurriness that gives Marks the poetic feeling that she was “being drawn into a rapport with the other where I lose the sense of my own boundaries; and the uncanny loss of proportion where big things slip beyond the horizon of my awareness while small events are arenas for a universe of feeling”²¹. Such feeling is impossible to convey without the specialty of the medium.

The second film is *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* (1994) by Seoungho Cho. Similar to Benning, Cho also “gives up [the film’s] optical clarity to engulf the viewer in a flow of tactile impressions”²². Marks remarks that the technicality is more refined in Cho’s films, and it is undoubtedly the technical handling of the medium that created the feeling that triggered Marks to write this passage. As Marks describes,

“In his *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* (1994) people moving quickly past on a New York street at dusk are transformed, through long exposure and slow motion, into ghostly paths of light that ripple through the space of vision. The luminous images evoke the loneliness of a person in a crowd, the thousands of missed encounters leaving their traces on consciousness... A few times, the image cuts in of a silhouetted hand holding a slide, or the glowing coils of a clear lightbulb, as though these are the only certain objects in a world of swirling mystery”²³

This effect, as Marks states, is only possible in video with its particular technicality. The person's loneliness can not be conveyed without long exposure and slow motion. It is a harmonious concoction of the subject chosen to be expressed and the perfect manipulation of the

²⁰ Marks, Laura U. *Touch*. University Of Minnesota, 2002, 1.

²¹ Marks, *Touch*, 1.

²² Marks, *Touch*, 1.

²³ Marks, *Touch*, 2.

technicality. This case firmly supports my argument that a medium drives and creates its own subject and aesthetics.

1.3 Furthermore

The abovementioned cases cast a deterministic shadow on the path of art; one might begin to wonder the absurd question: what is art but a mirror of history? Art can never derail from its context. To extend our thinking and showcase McLuhan's theory's flexibility, art can be seen as a medium of historical narration. The absurdity in "what is art but a mirror of history" is resolved when the term *mirror* is replaced with *medium*; the reason is precisely the medium is the message. To read a piece of art critically, its historical background is often a small reference, the other artistic approaches that are not explicit in history alone are more regarded. More often than not, it is the unique artistic way that an artist deals with a history that intrigues professional attention. The fact that art is deeply rooted in historical contexts but is not considered a straightforward vessel (perhaps, an extremely personal and biased one?) of history further proves that the medium is the message itself.

1.4 Conclusion

McLuhan's theory can be applied to present two opposing ways to look at the relationship between art and its context, both contribute to the topic of mimesis. The first is prolongedly proved: historical events drive the direction of art; art and its context are fastened in light of McLuhan's theory. The bond revives the philosophical concept of mimesis and its essential role in art. In fact, it contributes greatly to proving that art has never escaped a mimetic nature. The

duality of art and its context mirrors the duality of the imitator and the object. The other way is that art is an aesthetically-skewed vessel of history. In later passages, it will become clearer that art mimics its context; but as a medium, it develops its own message by engaging in mimesis in very different ways, creating the vast variety of works that art currently subsumes. No matter how abstract or original it might appear, a piece of art is always memetic due to the inevitable influence of its context; the obscuring of the object of mimesis is nothing more than an artistic tactic, which is the message that the medium “art” conveys. This will be developed and clarified in the second chapter.

There is also a practical significance in McLuhan’s theory: understanding and respecting the medium can be helpful in both making and appreciating art. From an artist’s standpoint, one is more bond to success when understanding the media one is working with. For instance, if artist A works with etching, A should at least consider two messages that the medium has. The first is etching’s unique technicality. Etching and engraving both fall under the intaglio process, meaning that marks are incised into a metal plate to be printed. Unlike engraving, which is a laborious process of pushing precise lines into metal by hand, etching provides a mark-making process that is even smoother and less frictional than drawing on paper, allowing very organic lines and letting acid do the labor. With such observation, A should not try to imitate the meticulous array of lines in engraving because of its higher footing in the art field, but devise the image regarding the effortless and organic mark-making that is exclusive to etching.

The second message is its current place in history. Although appreciation for Durer or Altdorfer’s etching is still current, it does not verify imitating them in the contemporary context. The German Danube School in the 1500s, with Albrecht Altdorfer as the leader, produced a line of etchings with the landscape as the primary subject. They were the first to celebrate landscape

by itself, excluding historical or religious content. However, if similar etchings are produced today, the historical significance is lost. Although I conclude in the second chapter that one can select the parts to imitate in art and it is crucial to be aware of the object of mimesis, the selection and awareness of it is not a guarantee for successful art. Overall, A needs to reconsider the role of intaglio contemporarily.

Chapter 2: Mimesis

Although in different approaches, Plato and Aristotle built a universe of memetic scenarios in multiple pieces of their works. The breadth of the scenarios renders mimesis a concept that can be creatively interpreted in its applications. Mimesis is a Greek term that can be translated in different readings into imitation, image-making, representation, make-belief, etc. Although one could seem more appropriate than the others in a context, they are not to be distributed without a pattern. In this essay, I will regard *mimesis* and *imitation* in the same way as the main term of the topic and how it is treated by Plato and Aristotle²⁴, and use *figurative* as a bridge between its proximity to Platonian mimesis and as an art terminology to refer to a certain type of art.

The general goal of this chapter is to deepen the understanding of mimesis' active participation in art and its crucial role in how art is made and appreciated. In this chapter, I will introduce Plato's and Aristotle's definitions of mimesis in *Republic III*, *Republic X*, and *Poetics*. I will showcase that in each work, the concept of mimesis becomes more extensive than the previous in consideration of wider contexts while making the same claim that art is essentially mimetic. Following the chronological pattern, I will explore and expand the boundary of the mimesis where it is needed but make the general claim that their theory remains valid in a contemporary context regarding the art.

Extending from the philosophical texts, I will argue that despite its heterogeneity, art has never escaped the ancient spell of mimesis, and it never could. I will elucidate this argument by

²⁴ The necessity to clarify the use of different terms is inspired by Paul Woodruff, who argues that imitation is an inaccurate replacement for mimesis in the Aristotelian term. He proposes that the object of mimesis could be fictional, as Aristotle points out, but it would be ridiculous for the object of imitation to be fictional. There would be terms such as fake goblins and fake fairies (81). This is not a concern for me, reasons explained in a later passage, therefore I will use imitation in the same way as mimesis.

explaining in detail how art is intertwined with different components of its context. Then, I will divide art history into three teams: art before modernism, modernism, and contemporary art, and show how each engages in mimesis distinctively.

2.1 Mimesis Defined

2.1.1 Plato

Plato's definition of and attitude towards mimesis is renowned for its inconsistency in the passages on this subject. He mainly deals with it in Books III and X of the *Republic*, and even in the same book, the concept is revised with a larger boundary in the later Book.

a. *Republic III*

In *Republic III*, Plato points out two memetic scenarios, the direct discourse in the poet and the self-assimilation in actors who perform the poetry. Both can fall under the general description of *impersonation*. Plato defines, "to liken oneself to another either in voice or in appearance is to make a mimesis of the person to whom one likens oneself"²⁵. The poet engages in impersonation by using direct discourse. He gives the example of Homer in his *Iliad*, where Homer presents himself as Chryses and makes great endeavors in actions and tones to persuade the impersonation. Plato draws a line between narration and imitation and claims that the latter engages in deception. For the poet, if he is not narrating the story as an outsider of the story, he is engaging in what Woodruff describes as a "double deception," in which the poet aims to "make

²⁵ Plato's *The Republic*. New York: Books, Inc., 1943, 393c5.

the audience believe that he himself is an elderly priest and that this priest is the author of the lines, when in fact he is not an elderly priest, and the lines are Homers”²⁶. The poet presents himself as a mimesis of the characters he writes about in their poem.

However, the danger of mimesis does not lie in the apparent impersonation of the poet but in the performers’ psychological assimilation into the characters. In Plato’s time, poems were to be performed by teenagers; in his astute observations, he finds that repeated mimetic behaviors can mold a young mind, some in an unwanted direction. Socrates (the character Plato impersonates in *Republic*) asks, “that mimetic acts [*mimeseis*], if allowed to continue from youth onward, establish themselves in the habits and nature of the person’s body, voice, and mind?”²⁷. Socrates points out in 377b that young souls are malleable; the character which the young soul has to try to fathom and repeatedly immersed in its mindset could fundamentally steer one’s ethical or societal standpoint.

I would like to elaborate on this psychological observation, for it shows the significant impact the process of mimesis can cast on a person. It is undebatable that behaviors shape the mindset, especially repetitive ones, due to a fundamental but often unrealized phenomenon in human beings: one tends to imitate one’s former self. In this elaboration, I will reevaluate and generalize the object of mimesis. Plato proposes the object of mimesis to be a specific character in a poem, which is generally an imaginary model one can choose to imitate. The inescapable object of mimesis, which radically explains the dangers of false repetitive behaviors, is the former self. If the former self engages repetitively in false behaviors without realizing their falsity, therefore, motivation to change, the present and future self will likely continue the ongoing trajectory. Essentially, this is how one lives and makes decisions; one looks back to the

²⁶ Rorty, e. (1992). *Essays on Aristotles "Poetics"*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 75.

²⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 395d1–3.

repository of what one already knows and has done and imitates the prior decisions with good consequences. The mimesis here is wired into the slightest aspects of our daily performance, and it is impossible to discern its every occurrence.

Creators of religions well understand this phenomenon. Encouraging repetitive behaviors is a psychological strategy many religions employ on believers to reinforce faith. Such as in Christianity, Christians are asked to attend Church every Sunday morning. The weekly service includes singing hymns, reading scriptures, and saying prayers. These ceremonies aim to invoke a sense of sacredness and divinity in the believers, whose faith will be reinforced by repetitively attending the ceremonies until they become a part of their selves. At the end of each service, believers line up to receive communion. In the ritual, believers receive a piece of bread and wine, representing Jesus' body and blood. The weekly consumption, symbolically, of Jesus is virtually the action of infusing Christianity into oneself, and it is designated in the Bible to be done with the least relievable emotion: guilt (1 Corinthians 11), all in an effort to entrench faith in the believers.

The guilt is honored, for receiving communion is also a reward. Those who are not baptized or have mortally sinned (CCC 1415) are not allowed to receive it. Then, the spirit of communion becomes a positive reinforcement for the attendee of Sunday Church. With weekly repetition, the rewarded religious behaviors will undoubtedly assimilate into a person and become a positive model in revision. Every Sunday morning, one's motivation to get out of bed early enough is essentially the mimetic trajectory of a favorable past.

Repetition is a huge part of Buddhist practice. For example, chanting is one of the most common practices in Buddhism. In some practices, Buddhists are asked to chant in millions and billions while visualizing the mantra's deity. With training, the visualization of a deity becomes

easier and clearer, supposedly bringing the practitioner's spirit closer to the deity, which ensures consistent faith. An especially interesting exercise in Dana practice, which means donation or charity, recapitulates the mimetic scenario well. In simple terms, Dana is a virtue of letting go of personal properties, sometimes including the body, and giving them to others out of compassion and generosity. It is a practice to confront greed, one of the Three Poisons of human nature that Buddhism proposed.

As Buddhist teachers discerned, asking a beginner to give away things with monetary value is unrealistic. Some exceptionally petty beginners would not let go of anything other than the already undesired ones. Instruction to a tailored exercise is given as such: to begin the practice of dana, hold something with little value, such as a handful of rice or an apple, in the right hand and pass it to the left hand while visualizing it as an act of charity. Then, pass it back to the right hand, and so on and so forth. One should gradually increase the value of the object and eventually proceed to give things to others. The scene might seem goofy, for such pettiness that requires this exercise is rare, but the logic behind it is sound, which makes it efficient if it were in an actual circumstance. Repeating the gesture of letting go, even as minute as from the right hand to the left, can gradually build up a repository of memories which one engages in dana, which allows later habituation and imitation. To pass back and forth each upgrade of the object is a mimetic behavior that could only happen with the former establishment of a repository. The exercise is essentially built upon the preestablished phenomenon that one is mimetic to one's past behaviors, the repetition of which can only encourage the mimesis.

My pointing out the seemingly manipulative methods that religions employ on their followers is not a critique of them; instead, I applaud them for the proven efficacy of their methods. Without them, faith can be easily diluted by other distractions that teem in one's daily

life. The efficacy can only further prove the constant mimesis of the former self and the impact that repetition can have on one's psychological terms.

Returning to Plato, with such an argument settled. Since not all characters in a poem are upright or kind, the danger that a young performer would assimilate into his/her character in the poem is truly concerning. As Stephen Halliwell concludes, "Socrates links the mimetic mode of poetry with the notion of character formation through habituation. Where poetic mimesis encourages close identification with the figures depicted, the experience of poetry acts as a "rehearsal" for life itself"²⁸. Performing poetry is not a practice that assists in educating a teenager into the desired role of guardian; therefore, Plato, as is famously known, banishes poetry. I would imagine that Plato would think otherwise if poems were only to be read like they are mostly today.

b. Republic X

While book X of the Republic refers back to book III in multiple passages, the concept of mimesis is expanded to include all poetry and visual arts instead of only the dramatic element of poetry. Instead of personation, Plato defines mimetic as representational in this book. In 596 d-e, he compares painters to a person who carries a mirror and mirrors everything around the person, who thinks of the mirrored images as creation. The criticism of mimesis here is mainly that artistic mimesis can only capture the partial appearance of things but can sometimes be ample to appear deceptively to be knowing the truth of things. Although Plato claims that only children and people with no judgment²⁹ could be tricked by a painting for reality, he only suggests that one would not be silly enough to walk into a painting, like a bird flies into a mirrored window. A

²⁸ Halliwell, S. (2006). *The poetics of Aristotle*. Chapel Hill [N.C.]: University of North Carolina Press, 54.

²⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, 598c.

painting is still capable of presenting matters in an unrealistic or illogical way; then, when it is displayed for open interpretation and seen by a young, malleable mind, a false reality could be conveyed.

Many might find this claim absurd or at least exaggerated. When one sees a painting of a person flying or triumphing over a fight with a vicious lion, obviously, one is not convinced by it. Female figures in Michelangelo's paintings are all extremely robust and sturdy; their only distinction from a muscular male body is the little breasts tacked on the flat pectoral muscle. Similarly, looking at the painting, it is unlikely that anyone's perception of the female figure would be impacted. However, with the growing appreciation for Michelangelo's aesthetics, there lies the true concern of how the painting almost encourages the superiority of male and male figures and the inferiority of females and their bodies. Plato's concern about false reality represented in a convincing way in a painting might not always be the perception of the apparent visuality but the underlying hint of it. In this case, replacing any female features, except the genitalia, can plant a little seed of inequality in a young mind. Michelangelo's case should elucidate Plato's view on the danger of mimesis in visual art.

Similar to how a painter can succeed in painting without full knowledge of his subject or the power of its possible impact, a poet can succeed in depicting a representation. The danger of the art reveals when the audiences are mistakenly led by the poet to think that his poetry is based on true knowledge. Due to the educational burden of poetry at the time, Plato proposes through Socrates that "the good poet, they say, if he is to do a good job of creating the things he does create, must necessarily create them with knowledge"³⁰. He suggests that art should only be mimetic of true knowledge, for virtue and vice; so in Michelangelo's case, he should capture the

³⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, 598 e.

female figure as they are in reality. However, this would raise a myriad of issues concerning the current aesthetic and artistic value. The difference between an encyclopedia and a poem, or a historical narration with fine art, is that the latter subject in both comparisons engages in mimesis in “artistic” ways and is not accurately reflective like both former subjects. In such cases, even when the object of mimesis is true knowledge or reality, the outcome and its impact are unpredictable. However, to be stripped of the creative handle as Plato would suggest, it could be impossible to distinguish art from history, science, or other noncreative fields. Plato’s standard of art is incompatible with that which many enjoy and devote their lives to, but I believe that the proposed danger exists and is wildly overlooked. Furthermore, his almost foundational view that art is mimetic remains very valid today.

2.1.2 Aristotle

a. Poetics

Aristotle deals little with mimesis outside *Poetics*. Like Plato, Aristotle also provides a wide interpretation of mimesis and inherits the view that art is mimetic in nature. However, Aristotle deviates from Plato’s view on mimetic art that it is inferior³¹ and a disgrace³², that it is so many folds removed from the reality that “nothing healthy or true can result”³³. Aristotle believes that mimesis is rooted in human nature. Mimetic behaviors in toddlers distinguish them from lower animals³⁴. Engaging in imitation is a learning process that can provide the greatest

³¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 603 b.

³² Plato, *The Republic*, 605 c.

³³ Plato, *The Republic*, 603 b.

³⁴ Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961, 1448 b.

pleasure. Art is only an extension of this joyful behavioral pattern and is a delight to see. In addition to Plato's categorization of poetry and visual arts, Aristotle also classified music and dance as arts with a mimetic nature. However, he does not suggest that the arts are representational in the same way; there are three criteria to distinguish them: their kinds of means, objects, and manners of imitation³⁵³⁶.

The *means* translated here is similar to the media of art defined in the first section but more specific; instead of painting, the means are colors and forms. Aristotle is essentially pointing out that it is not the imitative nature that categorized them as art but the artistic means they take. Many fields are imitative in essence, such as historians, but their publications are never considered art. Language is used by both poets and scientists, but a scientific report is not art. Therefore, it is the specific means in a piece of work that characterizes it as art, and imitation is only an underlying essence. Such as harmony and rhythm are the means of flute-playing, rhythm alone is the means of dancing, and the specific metre is the means of elegiac and epic poetry. These means distinguish them from other imitative fields and one another.

The *manner* in which the object is represented is the third difference³⁷ that Aristotle proposes. When means and objects are the same, one turns to the manner to distinguish the art. The manner differentiation is exclusively applicable to poetry. There are three manners that poetry can be:

“(1) speak at one moment in narrative and at another in an assumed character, as Homer does; or (2) one may remain the same throughout, without any such change; or (3) the imitators may represent the whole story dramatically, as though they were actually doing the things described”³⁸

³⁵ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1447 a.

³⁶ In another version, they are translated as media, object, and mode.

³⁷ The second will follow the third for it is extended.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1448 a.

All three manners are mimetic in the Aristotelian sense. In Woodruff's readings of this text, the first manner corresponds to Plato's categorization of impersonation and the second to his categorization of narration, which he does not consider mimetic. In general, Aristotle relieves poetry from the performative duty and proposes that it is mimetic either way. In a successful tragedy, one should feel pity and fear by only hearing about the plot³⁹, creatively constructed imitatively with pieces in reality. This is an example of how an expansion of mimesis' context renders deepened understanding of its role: mimesis remains central to poetry even when it is not performed.

Aristotle proposed that *objects* of mimesis are actions, and the agent for the actions is either a good or bad man. The dichotomy gives us three levels of goodness in an agent: above us, below us, and on the dividing line - the same as us. Imitating the distinct three gives art the second point of difference⁴⁰. Woodruff drops interesting speculation in his essay "Aristotle on Mimesis" that the object could be fictional while maintaining the authenticity of mimesis, which contributes a whole new aspect to the present concept of mimesis and revolutionizes the realm of art which is founded on it. This speculation would situate mimesis, where it is not only involuntarily essential in art but is crucially necessary to pursue it in creation intentionally. However, Woodruff seems to be proposing the possibility of escaping engagement in mimesis in the process of creation, which I disagree with.

Woodruff claims that Plato, in *Republic X*, was the first person to propose actions as objects of mimesis. However, the theory is overturned by Aristotle when he suggests that the actions could be fictional. Agents whose goodness is the same as we are noted to exist in real life, making the other two supportive of his claim: in 1451 b, Aristotle states that besides most

³⁹ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1453 b.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1448 a.

circumstances in tragedy, where the characters are always better than us, “there are some plays with but one or two known names in them,” and in comedy, where the characters who are worse than us are always made up”⁴¹. However, the passage he referenced to does not entirely lead up to his conclusion that “it follows that the object of poetic mimesis can be entirely made up by a poet” and only partially support “the object of a mimesis can be a fiction”⁴². The original passage goes,

“In Comedy this has become clear by this time; it is only when their plot is already made up of probable incidents that they give it a basis of proper names, choosing for the purpose any names that may occur to them, instead of writing like the old iambic poets about particular persons”⁴³

What is suggested here is that only under the circumstance that the comical plot is made up with probable incidents as a basis, a process that is clearly imitative to real life, proper names are given to the characters. It is true that instead of portraying a character imitatively referring to an agent, the character is inferred mimetically referring to a non-existent agent. However, the characteristics that can belong to an agent in a specific plot are not subject to be entirely made up; as Woodruff puts it, it is still determined by mimesis. This is coming from a point that there cannot be a thing that is “entirely made up” in the creation process. The term fiction is essentially not a recapitulation of making things up but an imitative art form like any other, teeming with imports of reality.

b. Extending from Aristotle

⁴¹ Rorty, e. (1992). *Essays on Aristotles "Poetics"*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 81, referencing Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1451 b 11.

⁴² Rorty, e, *Essays on Aristotles "Poetics"*, 81.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1451 b 11.

Although I disagree with Woodruff on the circumference of mimesis, I still find his speculation incredibly inspiring, not as a redefinition of mimesis but as a unique approach. He proposes at the end of the section,

“there is a difference between simply making up actions, and producing a mimesis of actions that have been made up...the difference is that mimesis affects us, while simply making things up - without mimesis - does not. To produce a mimesis of fiction is to give that fiction the power of engaging our attention and our emotions as if it were real” (Woodruff 81).

This passage translates to me as the question: would the first mimesis be rendered more real (less mimetic) when we look at it through the lens of the second? Are we tricked by the forms that mimesis takes into neglecting the nature of an object? I think the answer to both is affirmative and can formulate a deeper understanding of mimesis’s role in art.

The simple answer is this: the nature of something, whether mimetic or not, can be rendered irrelevant when it becomes an object of another mimesis, and what’s left in the object is condensed into a symbol of the object in the mimetic process. A symbol is truthful in itself no matter what it symbolizes. Therefore, it is not that the second mimesis casts trueness on the first, but a new truth is formed from partial aspects of the first due to an artistic choice of what to imitate. This slips right back into Plato’s observation that art is only mimetic of partial reality. I will exemplify this with a case of artistic appropriation.

Ancient Rome is a name given to three almost identical paintings by Giovanni Paolo Panini in the 1750s. Panini was one of the first artists who engaged in appropriation. Although the term did not exist until Picasso and Braque’s cubist collage, appropriation can cover many artworks before its existence. Appropriation refers to the act of borrowing or reusing existing elements within a new work. Panini’s three paintings all depict a grand hall, and every wall is carpeted with paintings of significant architectural sites, such as the Colosseum and the

Pantheon. The floor is crowded with sculptures from ancient Rome, such as *Laocoön and His Sons*, the *Farnese Hercules*, and the *Apollo Belvedere*. Three folds of mimesis are presented to us when we look at *Ancient Rome*. The first is the imitation of natural elements in architecture. As Arnold Whittick exemplifies, among many more contemporary examples, “Domes and triumphal arches are images of the universe, ziggurats and pyramids of hills and mountains, columns with their flowering capitals of large plants and trees (the earliest columns were actual tree trunks)”⁴⁴. The second is the paintings on the wall, appropriating the architectures. The third is the painting *Ancient Rome*, which appropriates the architectural paintings.

Most paintings on the wall never existed as actual objects. Woodruff would have called them made-ups. I would regard them each as a figurative vision of architecture or site; although nonexistent, there is still an imaginary vehicle that rides the mimetic lane. I categorized them as an individual step of mimesis, for the architectures are pictured as individual paintings before they are composited on the walls in *Ancient Rome*. The “ought to be”⁴⁵ paintings pictured in Panini’s mind are the object of mimesis. Regardless of its nature, Woodruff would propose that *Ancient Rome*, a mimesis of the wall paintings, should have the power to persuade us of the trueness that was originally missing in the non-existing objects. It does, not because of its realistic style or an actual change in the status of existence, but because the two folds of mimesis in the paintings on the wall are flattened into a visual symbol required to construct the image. The symbol is not a deception, for no one expects it to be fully accurate of the object; there is an unspoken acquiescence in symbols that appear in an art piece, just like one acquiesces in the

⁴⁴ Whittick, Arnold. “Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.” *Philosophy* 52, no. 199 (1977): 83.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1460 b: “(1) The poet being an imitator just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, he must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be”.

things in one's peripheral sight. Therefore, the object appears as truth in the form of a symbol regardless of its mimetic or fictional nature.

This theory facilitates our understanding of the place mimesis takes in making art. We can almost visualize Plato's nightmare: the reality has been that an artist can subtract the unwanted elements in an object and engage in mimesis diversely upon the selection. After selection, the variety of ways artists can engage in mimesis grows exponentially with time. This theory can only be fully grounded when building upon the unquestionableness that art is indeed mimetic. Although Plato and Aristotle built their theories on the default claim that art is mimetic, it could be argued that this foundational theory is outmoded in the current context. The freedom in making art is growing, which could create an illusion that some art is not mimetic. With your abstract art, conceptual art, and land art, it is easy to turn to think that art ceased to be mimetic, especially in the way that art was in Plato and Aristotle's time. This is where one has confused mimesis with figuration: art is no longer figurative but remains mimetic. In the following section, I will argue that their theory works on all kinds of art: I will ground this theory with two approaches: why art has to be mimetic in theory and how it is in existence.

2.2 The Unavoidable Mimesis: Why and How

2.2.1 Introduction

Plato and Aristotle claimed that all art is mimetic in a time when visual art is evidently and exclusively figurative. Many are religious art, which is conceptually reflective of religious stories, which is part of its historical context, and formally reflective of human and animal

figures. If one is to show the philosophers Donald Judd's *Untitled (Stack)* from two thousand years later, there is a good chance that the philosophers would not recognize it as art and fail to recognize its mimetic nature. They might be surprised to learn that their claim remains valid in Judd's piece, or regardless of how drastically art has changed - all art is still mimetic in either one or both of the same dual aspects of a religious painting: formal and contextual. Both aspects fall under Plato's "representative function" in art.

Plato claims in *Republic III*,

"the work of art is an embodiment of the physical laws of the universe, which are harmonic in their nature, and in virtue of this representative function, the work of art is capable of modifying man's environment and of transmitting this harmony to his soul. But it only has this power by virtue of its universal, abstract perfection."⁴⁶

Plato suggests that the representative function and abstract perfection must both be present in a *merited* art. Universal and abstract perfection can be translated into an acknowledged aesthetic vision. As Whittick proposes, the gradual shift from formally representational art to nonrepresentational art is a shift in the aesthetic vision instead of representative function. Why, then, is the representative function unavoidable no matter how the art looks and what it means?

As Whittick proposes:

"Yet as it is difficult to think of the creative impulse as operating without external stimuli, and all art begins in this way, it must therefore begin as some kind of representation and the processes of abstraction would still come under the general umbrella of mimesis"⁴⁷

Starting in Modernism, some art loses its formal mimicry easily found in religious art, but essentially, all art is mimetic of its context. However, this is too broad a claim to be meaningful. I will break the term "context" into three interwoven components, explain how each is involved in

⁴⁶ Plato, *Republic III*, 401.

⁴⁷ Whittick, "Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.", 83.

mimesis, and show how they could be spotted in an example artwork. Ultimately, the tight, inextricable, and even unrealizing binds between art and its context will show that it has never escaped the fate of mimesis.

2.2.2 Merited Art

It is crucial to define merited art before further discussions. The term art means different things philosophically and existentially. The latter will be employed here. Most works that “art” describes will not pass as art by Plato’s standards; philosophical theories on art seem to work like an outsider reference but never a rule that art in existence follows. It can be said that the art industry is shifting further and further away from the standards of the philosophers⁴⁸⁴⁹; even then, and unlike other philosophical views on art, Plato and Aristotle’s claim that art is mimesis is still applicable. I will define *Merited art*, a term that I employ to substitute for *art* in this section, to differentiate between art (as we usually refer to it and what it subsumes) and works made purposefully to be art⁵⁰. Although Plato’s leading theory remains correct, his definition of “a work of art”⁵¹ is evidently outmoded: many credited works of art aim to disturb the soul of their viewers instead of transmitting harmony, as Plato suggests. This common acknowledgment of

⁴⁸ Because philosophical approaches are always pure and absolute, and contemporary art cannot be further away from those adjectives.

⁴⁹ Although Arthur Danto would disagree, art is an autonomous industry, and critiques and rules made by philosophers easily expire. Most contemporary art does not fit Kant’s four judgments of beauty but is widely accepted and appreciated by the art industry. Does theory define art? Or does existing art refine theory? Imagine that C is an up-and-coming artist. C presents C’s work to both Kant and a gallery that will possibly represent C. They have given opposite opinions on how C should continue his path; there is no doubt that C would listen to the latter. Is the gallerist more profound than Kant? No one would admit it as such, but the gallerist is a representative of the authority, a face of the art industry, and has the final say on C’s artistic career. Art is different as an industry and as a concept. The concept is played by philosophers, but the industry is acceptive and not aligned with the concept—this is especially apparent in the development of contemporary art.

⁵⁰ Indicating the pieces which have qualities or forms of art, or use an artistic medium, but failed to be recognized as art.

⁵¹ Plato, *Republic III*, 401.

“credit” is precisely the benchmark of a merited art referenced in this essay. It is a credit given by the institution of appreciators and, in most cases, accepted by the public⁵².

Ever since the beginning of art⁵³ as a societal industry, the dichotomy of artists and appreciators has been formed. Their relationship is very intimate and essential in securing art's existence as an industry. Without art, there would be no appreciators. Without appreciators, art is unidentified and out of common sight. The appreciators here can also be called critics or art theorists, who do not always appreciate art but form a secure institution that understands art's historical progression and is tightly attentive to it and the motion in the industry. Merited art has always been identified through its authority, granted by the public's prolonged trust. It is increasingly so with the art appearing in all its variant.

The only exception is in the most recent years when self-media allows individuals to expand their possible appreciators to anyone who has internet access. However, appreciators' institutions still have an overwhelming authority over which art is merited. Even though a piece of art is to be recognized by a good amount of people who popularize the general public in this context through the internet, it is still considered less than merited art, even in the very own minds of those people. Moreover, there is a good chance that the art looks very similar to any merited art; then, the appreciation for it is only a side-effect of having already appreciated the merited art, which is determined by appreciators. There has not been a case in which the general public drives an aesthetic vision without the participation of the appreciators, which must include

⁵² Some contemporary art is credited by the institution but is too inexplicit for contemporary taste. However, the view of the public is secondary and does not contribute to crediting a piece of art. This is an observation, not an approval.

⁵³ The beginning here does not indicate the first art that is made, but the beginning of art as a societal industry, when an artist becomes a societal role. Cave paintings are only later deemed as art and is not recognized as art when they are painted.

the portion of approval⁵⁴. The history of art, as we study, is constructed by such an institution, and it will continue to be. An art completely denounced by the institution without controversy would not be considered merited art and be listed in the textbook. The appreciators in the institution have total authority to mold art history to their aesthetic selection. It should be clear now that merited art is art approved by the institution of appreciators. History is the only reference to a possible pattern for a subject like art. Looking back at it, approval by the institution, at least of some sort, is the only common denominator. Especially considering that all art we know of is through its filter, there can be no other method of classification.

2.2.3 Art's Bond with Its Contexts

a. Historical Context

Chapter One has provided ample examples of how historical mediums have driven art, both as a realm and as individual pieces. The happenings of the world constantly motivate the progression of art. As listed in the first chapter: religious reformations, wars, scientific inventions, propagandistic needs, and political shifts are only a few examples of the countless historical happenings that affected art⁵⁵. One might ask, why does the bond between art and its historical context lead to the result of mimesis? With the ground that art is inseparable from its time, it is urgent now to understand the relationship between the two claims, *the medium is the message*, and *art is mimetic*.

⁵⁴ Some art in their debut is controversial within the institution, but is still appreciated by some at the time and more later.

⁵⁵ The term “art” indicates “merited art” explained in 2.2.2 from now on.

It could be said that the corollary of inescapable historical stimuli is that art is reflective of its time. However, the reflection is not straightforward, as Plato would hope, because artistic manipulation is the medium of presenting the reflection. Since the medium (artistic manipulation of the reflection of history), but not the content (direct reflection of history), is the message; the message is not reflective but mimetic. It is exactly that the medium (not the content) is the message that makes art mimetic (and not reflective). Mimesis in art essentially refers to the artistic imitation of a time, and not a reflection of a time, which corresponds to how Britannica defines mimesis in art: “The word is Greek and means “imitation” (though in the sense of ‘re-presentation’ rather than of ‘copying’)”⁵⁶. Britannica’s definition suggests that ‘re-presentation’ differs from ‘copying’, and as analyzed above, the difference lies in the artistic handle. Only with the artistic handle is it mimesis and not reflection, and there would be no content for an artistic handle without history’s constant feeding. Art and mimesis are indivisible this way.

With such an argument settled, I will move on to art’s bond with the artist and its former existence. I will only explain the component’s inevitable input in the art, as it should be clear now that art functions as a medium that, because of its artistic handle, is a mimetic but not reflective process.

b. Personal Context

“There is no such thing as art. There are only artists” ---Gombrich, *The Story of Art*

Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, an encyclopedia of art history and theory, opens with the declarations above. Why would a profound historian make such claims and consider them so

⁵⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "mimesis." Encyclopedia Britannica, November 22, 2011. <https://www.britannica.com/art/mimesis>.

significant that they deserve to be the first sentences of a book? The claims are made with no lack of psychological analysis when looking at a piece of art: the artist is always present in some way. Everything that a piece of art is appreciated for is credited to the artist's unique vision. Every decision—from which medium is used, what form is referenced, what subject is depicted...to where every stroke is landed—is made from the artist's intention and experience. As Whittick claims when arguing that art is essentially mimetic, “All art is expression of some kind: there cannot be expression without a subject which exists external to and before the work of art, including the artist's emotions”⁵⁷. Not only is the artist's emotion the external subject expressed in art, as Whittick proposes, but his/her every bit of experience, thoughts, and perceptions are all material for expression. No art can be made independent of those personal traces and, therefore, independent of the artist. This is precisely the explanation for Gombrich's claims: art offers nothing more than the artist him/herself.

With the medium of artistic manipulation, personal events are expressed in subtle methods, turning the pieces of art into a mimesis of reality. The example of Kirchner later well demonstrates this theory.

c. Industrial Context

The artist's previous creation and education in art history are both parts of the personal experience, the external subject prior to a new expression, as Whittick puts it, and can all serve as an object of mimesis for a later expression. However, they function not only as a repertoire like other experiences but also as guidance and textbook. Learning about existing pieces solitarily casts one's aesthetic vision, and one's practice constantly recasts it. I will explain the two situations separately.

⁵⁷ Whittick, “Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.”, 83.

The Cast

Every artist is guided by existing art, and the trace of mimicking existing art is often conspicuous. Every execution in an artistic expression is steered by an aesthetic vision formed in no other way than studying existing art, which is single-handedly determined by the authority. Although it is laid down in previous texts that all personal experience can contribute to constructing a piece of art, the actual artistic construction is led solely by the industry-influenced vision. Such as, when Salvador Dali wants to depict his dream, a personal experience, he uses painting, an industry-recognized medium, instead of choosing other expressive portals, such as a diary. It has to be in every artist's intention to somehow line up with the industry's convention, which results in a mimetic aesthetic vision. To be conducted by such a vision, one is doomed to make pieces reminiscent of previous art.

John Dewey is well aware of the mimicry. In his essay "The Live Creature and Aesthetic Experience", Dewey proposes that artistic execution should be continuously surveilled by intelligence and evaluated by sensitivity, the unity of intelligence and sensitivity form a "mode of thought"⁵⁸. He claims that the collaboration between doing and undergoing⁵⁹ should be refined to every stroke (if it were a painting), therefore when mimicry of history takes place, it is discerned by intelligence immediately. Then, intelligence can terminate the indiscipline attempt to mimic and reconsider the image through one's own aesthetic vision. Dewey states, "[a]n incredible amount of observation and of the kind of intelligence that is exercised in perception of qualitative relations characterizes creative work in art..."⁶⁰; he proposes that consciously

⁵⁸ Stuhr, John J. *Pragmatism And Classical American Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2000, 524.

⁵⁹ Doing is the execution and undergoing is the perception of the execution; both should be actively engaged throughout a artistic creation.

⁶⁰ Stuhr, *Pragmatism And Classical American Philosophy*, 526.

attending the piece with the unity of intelligence and sensitivity is the only approach to innovation. However, it is not so simple practically.

Many years ago, as an art student, I discerned mimicry in my painting midway. I found that I am only enjoying the look of the painting because the color combination and stroke texture are vaguely reminiscent of paintings by a successful artist, Fanzhi Zeng. In my observation, I did not reference Zeng's work on purpose; he was not even my favorite artist; I believe it is purely my acknowledgment of his fame (approval by the art industry) and my subconscious desire to be recognized in the same way that dictated my movements. The intelligence, as Dewey puts it, stops me at that point. However, instead of pulling me out of the mimicry and back on a "personally" devised track, I was left completely bewildered and unable to proceed, and the reason is exactly as I mentioned above, my aesthetic vision is founded on existing art⁶¹; nothing is left if it is denied of referencing them. I turned to my teacher, David Reid-Marr, at the time and explained the challenge. He told me that the best artists mimicked past art⁶² at the start of their practice and mimicked their own art later, as I found out later myself, which will be clarified shortly.

I agree with Dewey that mimicry of existing art is undesirable, but unlike Dewey, I cannot see a way out: all existing art is recognized by the authority; with that acknowledgment, almost impossible to be uninfluenced. As I mentioned earlier when defining *merited art*, art is an industry founded on approval by the authority. Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions; in his book *The Artist's Reality*, Mark Rothko claims when criticizing the artists who served society's evaluation, "We shall not speak here of those whose daring periodically revitalized art, saving it

⁶¹ Including my own art prior to this piece, which will be elaborated later.

⁶² In *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent Van Gogh*, Theo can often guess which artists Vincent Van Gogh hangs out with recently through his new paintings, where there are traces of the other artist's style.

from its narcissistic mimicry of itself.”⁶³ Rothko unreservedly praises the artists who did not conform to authority and pushed art forward. I surmise that Rothko wrote the sentence bearing Duchamp in mind; he is the face of the iconoclast and revitalized art most radically: defining a ready-made object as art is unprecedented and almost unparalleled after him. However, innovation is still the deceptive surface of mimesis to the public eye, as dadaism is a product of WWI, but it does spring up the portion of innovation in art and its redefinition in the face of the inevitable mimesis, which will be discussed in the conclusion of this section.

The Recast

In the section on Plato’s concern that repetitive behavior is an accessible object of mimesis for teenagers, I brought in the strategies religions employ to secure faith in their believers, which includes repetitive rituals and positive reinforcement, to validate and exemplify Plato’s worry. The finding was that one is prone to imitate one’s former self⁶⁴. This phenomenon is also frequently spotted in the realm of art. In the most obvious sense, a number of artists discover a particular style and stick with it for their whole career. Such as Jackson Pollock, Phillip Guston, Andy Warhol, and Picasso. These artists’ distinctive style is immediately admitted by the authority of their time, so one might think that the reason they continued the practice might lean toward maintaining their success in the industry and less toward imitating the former self. However, Vincent Van Gogh also has a persistent and unique style, which is not approved by the authority until years after his death. His case is a better example of an artist’s tendency to imitate the former self.

⁶³ Rothko, Mark. *The Artist’s Reality*. Edited by Christopher Rothko. Yale University Press, 2004. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm20g>, 3.

⁶⁴ In-text, page 21.

A small part of the self is unavoidably attached to every artistic expression one has, especially but not necessarily the pieces approved by the authority⁶⁵, even without realizing it. The attachments only restrain and distort the artist's aesthetic vision. For example, A⁶⁶ attends a glaze mixing class but has not followed the instruction entirely, creating dull and unsaturated glazes instead of the desired opaqueness and brightness. However, a part of A's self is attached to the experience, and her aesthetic vision is subtly impacted by it. It is not that A insisted on her product while thinking that it is defective, but her actual taste in ceramic objects is distorted by the experience. Little incidents during the art practice, such as an inferior technique, lousy craftsmanship, or accidents, all contribute to what can be called a personal aesthetic. Could this be the personal aesthetic vision that satisfies Dewey's claim? I doubt it, for there is always a first piece that is somehow mimetic of past art; for A, it is the correct formula of glaze. The incidents are mimetic themselves, and the later reference to them could only be a layering of mimicry.

d. Exemplifying a piece of art in the three contexts.

German Expressionist artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's painting *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* is rich in showing its various contexts. The painting incorporated a somewhat cubist approach with expressionism, with sharp, straight edges constructing geometric surfaces, which are Cubist characteristics, and bright, eerie colors and rough strokes, which are Expressionist characteristics. The *context of the industry* reveals itself: it is mimetic of both movements. The painting was painted during WWI in 1915. Kirchner was a Nazi victim. It depicts a slim man's upper body, representing the artist himself, with his right hand cut off clean from the wrist, incapable of taking the cigarette dangling from his mouth. The figure is in a soldier's uniform.

⁶⁵ Like an art teacher, gallery, or critic.

⁶⁶ A is a friend of mine who studies in the Rhode Island School of Design.

The brutal mutilation of his right hand, the hand for painting, symbolizes castration, which is a reflection of *his personal experiences* under the shadow of his *historical time*: being suppressed by Nazi Germany. Quoting art historian Donald Gordon's passage in 1987:

The artist cannot paint and soldier cannot fight. His violation is as frustrated as his body is mutilated. The painting's personal symbolism is one of paralysis and castration, of functional loss both professional and sexual. Its social symbolism, however, is one of defiance and military authority, of an imagined sacrifice of a body part to avoid a battlefield sacrifice of the whole person. If a man must be unmanned to avoid military action, then Kirchner shows by a wished-for amputation a deeply felt pacifism.⁶⁷

The infusion of both the personal and historical in the painting is clear. Essentially, a painting is not constructed by canvases and tubes of oil paint, but by a collision of mimics: the suppression of the artist, a WWI background, and the thriving styles of painting.

e. Conclusion

In conclusion, as art simultaneously mimics so many things, it is absurd to consider the possibility of true innovation, a concept often tied to artistic creation; for Dewey even, only true innovation bears artistic and aesthetic values. As Plato refers to a poet in *Ion*, "There is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him"⁶⁸, which once again points to the mimetic nature of expression. Plato points out that true innovation, the non-mimesis, is only possible when a person is completely disengaged from oneself, but this is only a theoretical surmise. There is no sign that one can engage in non-mimetic artistic expression in real life.

⁶⁷ Leonard V. Smith. "The Fallen Star of German Artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner." Leonard V. Smith - Accessed 2/10/2023. <https://www.historynet.com/the-fallen-star-of-german-artist-ernst-ludwig-kirchner/>.

⁶⁸ Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 1.

With such absolute claims made, how could one even make a piece of art? Remember that forbidding mimesis comes from philosophers, not the art industry; the latter is the only entity artists should aim to impress. When a piece of art is labeled “innovative”, as one often is, it only indicates that it is fresh for public sight; the debut of the first impressionist painting, digital art, or conceptual art are all considered innovative in this sense. The term is applied in the art world not to indicate absolute, mimesis-free creation, but freshness to the public eye.

2.2.4 Mimesis in Specific Times

With the abovementioned claims, it should be somewhat easy to seek the presence, or in a sense the happening, of mimesis in any artwork. Nevertheless, to have the concept fully settled, I would like to show how each period of art engages in mimesis distinctively and bring in other voices concerning the topic.

“The poet being an imitator just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, he must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be.”⁶⁹

Mystically, the quote by Aristotle almost outlined the three periods of art I will introduce: pre-Modernist art (said or thought to be or to have been), Modernist art (were or are), and contemporary art (ought to be). As each period’s art corresponds to Aristotle’s description of an “imitator”’s art, their mimetic path is revealed.

a. Mimesis in Pre-Modernist Art

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1460 b.

It seems almost unjust to render everything before Modernism as a singularity. However, everything from mud handprints in a cave in Spain to *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* by Casper David Friedrich right before Modernism began falls under the general genre of representational art and is mimetic in the same way. Aristotle's claim that they portray things as they "are said or thought to be or to have been"⁷⁰ describes most art in this period. Religious themes dominated art for thousands of years, followed by historical and mythological themes; mythologies are said, religious stories are thought to be, and the historical moments have been. Perhaps the only exclusion from Aristotle's description is prehistoric art, where art begins.

The first artistic expressions, as identified way later, began at approximately 40000 B.C., way before any languages. The cave paintings and stone carvings are the first signs of expression spotted in human history, and the expression is one that intends to mimic real life. It verifies Aristotle's claim that to imitate is in human nature; cave paintings of animals, hunting scenes, and even direct handprints—first signs of documentation that is inherited throughout pre-Modernist art; bones, stones, and ivory carved into shapes of women, figures, and heads. All art from prehistorical to Realism in the 1800s, despite the disparity in fineness and the variety of themes, is mimetic in one way—figuration. One has no issue recognizing the figures, naming the animals, or objects from a piece of art, without knowing its story, concept, or symbolism—there are plenty, but the signifier in the symbolism is always recognizable as an existing matter. This would not be true in some Modernist art, which is mimetic differently.

b. Mimesis in Modernism

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1460 b.

Many might think art has been divorced from mimesis since Modernism began. They mistake mimesis for the concept of figuration. Figuration is absent from some Modernist movements and secondary⁷¹ in others, but mimesis is always present. As Whittick proposes, “The opposition of imitative and non-imitative art, or representational and abstract art, was a later evolution and, I think, a questionable one”⁷². I will divide Modernism roughly into two parts: non-abstract or formally-based art, and abstract art. Conceptual art can be described as neither⁷³, it is a bridge to contemporary art; the identification of Modernism and Contemporary art will be discussed in the next section. I will explain the alignment of the non-abstract movements with Aristotle’s claim. Then I will introduce Whittick’s process of proving mimesis in abstract art. Every Modernist movement, artist, and even piece of art contributes to the grand image of Modernism. Flattening them is not an act of ignorance but to classify them by one standard: their way of mimesis.

When the burden of documentation was taken over by the invention of cameras, Modernism was initiated. Instead of documenting reality, it began to document art itself; it is the period where McLuhan’s theory is exerted the most. Considering that the message belongs to the medium instead of the content, new techniques are developed to represent things “as they were or are.”⁷⁴ The first Modernist movement was Impressionism, a precise demonstration of representing Aristotle’s first description of the art. Monet and his fellow artists devised a method of painting that presents reality as it is perceived in every immediate moment. The method captures the change of things and their perception, which is a more accurate capture of how

⁷¹ Clement Greenberg claims, “representational features were secondary in modernism where they had been primary in premodern art”, Source: Danto, Arthur C.. "Chapter One. Introduction: Modern, Postmodern, and Contemporary" In *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History - Updated*, 8.

⁷² Whittick, “Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.”, 82.

⁷³ Many might think that contemporary art is a continuation of conceptual art, but there is a difference. There are strict rules for a conceptual art, but none for a contemporary art.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1460 b.

things “are.” Instead of illustrating the scene of haystacks at noon, morning, or sunset, like previous landscape paintings were, Monet adjusted every stroke to how the moment meets the eye, capturing the change throughout the day in every stroke. Cubist painters have similar approaches. As the artists move around the subject while painting, more than one facet is captured, which in a sense, is a more accurate capture of the immediate reality. It might be a little difficult to recognize the representation of how things are in abstraction, a central achievement of Modernism, but Arnold Whittick’s thoughts on abstraction resolves the difficulty.

If I were to seek mimesis in abstraction, I would say that eliminating figuration in a piece of art is an artistic reflection, therefore mimesis⁷⁵, of the artist’s position in the industrial and historical context. Since the beginning of Modernism, the demands for breakthroughs have been increasing—unconventional and unprecedented art forms are pursued by artists and expected by the people. The first abstract movement, Abstract Expressionism, emerged and flourished in America after WWII ended. As Stella Paul describes, “these young artists, troubled by man’s dark side and anxiously aware of human irrationality and vulnerability, wanted to express their concerns in a new art of meaning and substance.”⁷⁶ The combination of a zealous attempt at liberation and being introduced to and influenced by the more advanced European art initiated Abstract Expressionism, which mimics both contexts.

Arnold Whittick has a different approach to the belief that abstraction is mimetic: abstraction is not independent of an object; it is the artist’s aesthetic vision that retains the perception from immediate recognition of the object that created abstraction. As Whittick proposes, one form abstraction can take “is when the originating representational element is

⁷⁵ Why an artistic reflection is mimesis is explained earlier in the essay.

⁷⁶ Paul, Stella. “Abstract Expressionism.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd_abex.htm (October 2004).

transformed in various ways. The transformation, however, is often really a reversal of the stages of perception to emphasize the initial mode which is the essentially aesthetic mode.”⁷⁷ He then explains how an aesthetic vision functions, “the [abstract] artist is concerned with the qualities of things rather than the things themselves, with the colours, lights and shadows of a landscape rather than with the actual trees and hills.”⁷⁸ The alternative to the aesthetic vision is the utilitarian vision, which identifies objects immediately. He claims the two modes of perception in A.N. Whitehead’s *Symbolism: Its meaning and effect*, presentational immediacy, and causal efficacy correspond to and distinguish his terms aesthetic vision and utilitarian vision. Whitehead defines perception as a symbolic reference and is in the interplay between the two modes. He proposes that causal efficacy means the direct perception among lower-grade organisms, and presentational immediacy is only found in high-grade organisms, in the way that lower-grade organisms cannot resist recognizing an object at once while high-grade organisms, such as human beings, in presentational immediacy, can. In retaining the state of the colored shapes as they are perceived in presentational immediacy, without referencing causal efficacy, abstraction is expressed. Whittick concludes, “[w]hether the work is recognizable, in the sense of causal efficacy, is unimportant in some works of art. If it has this element it may be called representational, and if it has not it may be called abstract, but there is no real difference in the essentials of appreciation.”⁷⁹ Abstract art still references reality; it is the mode of perception that the artist is in that determines whether there are representational elements in a piece of art. Due to perception’s interplay between the two modes, there is plenty of art that is partially abstract and partially figurative, such as Picasso and Braque, as Whittick exemplifies. No matter the

⁷⁷ Whittick, “Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.”, 84-85.

⁷⁸ Whittick, “Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.”, 85.

⁷⁹ Whittick, “Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.”, 86.

mode of perception, the expressive portal is the same, “[t]he originating stimulus to expression operates without any distinction of representational and abstract art, and is thus essentially mimesis in the Greek sense.”⁸⁰ It is clear then, in Whittick’s approach, abstraction still represents things as they are or were in Aristotle’s description: the artist still references the immediate reality while making art, it is only the absence of casual efficacy in the artist that causes the irrecognition of its object of mimesis in the artwork.

c. Mimesis in Contemporary Art

Drawing the boundary or defining contemporary art is trickier than the previous two; it does not have an identifiable style. Streams of artworks form rivers of movement and converge in the open sea of contemporary art. Rivers and sea are distinctive, but the specific coordinate where one meets the other is hard to locate, especially when one is in that limbo. However, in retrospect, contemporary art has revealed a very distinguished profile from Modernism, as the object of mimesis changes drastically. Philosopher Arthur Danto goes in depth to distinguish between Modernist and Contemporary art. He defines contemporary art as such:

“Contemporary art, by contrast [to Modernism], has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is at all different as art from modern art generally. It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it.”⁸¹

Unlike the beginning of Abstract Expressionism, contemporary artists ceased to impress their viewers with novelty but began embracing imitating past art. This has everything to do with Duchamp bringing ready-made into the art industry; in my opinion, it marks the junction of Modernism and contemporary art. Danto holds the perspective that contemporary art is

⁸⁰ Whittick, “Mimesis, Abstraction and Perception.”, 86.

⁸¹ Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History - Updated*, 5.

liberation. He claims, “[t]here is no a priori constraint on how works of art must look—they can look like anything at all.”⁸² I agree with Danto that contemporary art often takes past art as the object of mimesis, however, it might not be the artists’ willingness at first to degrade from reality to past art as the subject of their work, but are cornered by the immensity of Duchamp’s impact. The artists had to surrender to the fact that no work can surmount Duchamp’s iconoclasm and place in history, therefore desperately turned to reviving pre-Duchamp art for a sense of security and encouragement. At this point, a moment when a coat rack or a urinal is art, nothing is off-limits; the fear that art might merge with everything else arises and the artists grabbed on to the history, where art is absolutely distinguished. The craving to impress like Duchamp and the fear of the fall of the art industry collided and formed a very confusing state in art history. Therefore, instead of liberation as Danto claims, embracing the mimesis of past art is a conscious degradation forced upon the artists who wish to maintain an art career. To mimic past art is described by Aristotle's proposal of representing things as they “ought to be.”⁸³ What is more “ought to be” in art than referencing the already formulated art?

Danto’s many descriptions of contemporary art contribute to the same view: contemporary art is mimetic of existing art. Such as, “[c]ontemporary art,” he wrote, ‘manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward.’⁸⁴ and “[i]n my view, moreover, [contemporary art] designates less a period than what happens after there are no more periods in some master narrative of art, and less a style of making art than a style of using styles.”⁸⁵ Many contemporary art pieces combine past styles in production. For example, the Guerilla Girls is a group of feminists activist producing art that manifests political statements

⁸² Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History - Updated*, 16.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1460 b.

⁸⁴ Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History - Updated*, 5.

⁸⁵ Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History - Updated*, 10.

that fights sexism and racism. Their work *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?* is a display of combining styles. The women figure with her head shielded by a gorilla mask is originally from French artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's painting *Grande Odalisque*, recreated in the style of pop art. Despite the formal aspect, the piece is entirely conceptually based, which is one of the rules of the conceptual art movement. However, their work incorporated the three historical styles (at least) only in superficiality. Each mimetic component alone is weak and inauthentic to its context⁸⁶. If one is still producing Impressionist paintings in 2023, one is considered inauthentic to one's time and is often critiqued. The importance of authenticity is growing in contemporary art as access is granted to the once covert and shameful field of imitation. Artists are asked, more than ever, to be simultaneously authentic to the historical, personal, and industrial context. As art critic Jerry Saltz twittered recently, "Artists: If your art looks sort of like Abstract Expressionism you should think about changing your art."⁸⁷ Considering Saltz's comment and the Guerilla Girls' success, it seems that contemporary art is not a single but a unity of the mimeses of past art. This is neither a critique nor a non-critique of contemporary art—for now, what matters is my thesis that contemporary art, as complex and diverse as it looks, like all other art, is still mimetic. Observing how the past styles are incorporated is only a deeper analysis of how contemporary art works and further proof of its mimicry of past art.

Conclusion

⁸⁶ Such as, conceptual art asks for complete neglect in visuality. Pop art is a direct reflection of commercialization at its time. Both are not true in this work.

⁸⁷ Saltz, Jerry. "Artists: If Your Art Looks Sort of like Abstract Expressionism You Should Think about Changing Your Art." Twitter. Twitter, January 30, 2023. https://twitter.com/jerrysaltz/status/1620045651861180417?cxt=HHwWgsDQ8fu7x_ssAAAA.

This essay focuses on two interwoven theories: the medium is the message, and art is mimetic. In chapter one, I introduced McLuhan's theory and its applications in art. "Medium is the message" is a concept that McLuhan employs on the swift technology progression, disputing the common misconception that the technologies are neutral in themselves and it is the content that matters and claims that the medium itself is the message and has the ability to change the configuration of society and industry. When it is applied to art, the mediums are both physical and historical, which has a firm grip on the fate of art. Just like the invention of electricity changed the scale, pace, and pattern of society, the invention of cameras changed the whole purpose and appearance of art. The progression of art is always aligned with the progression of history, as the five cases show, which essentially exemplify in depth the inseparable relationship between art and its historical context and grounded art to a reflective nature. However, art is not directly reflective but mimetic of history, for the content (the historical happenings) is expressed through the medium of art, which is the message itself. McLuhan's theory is applied again and leads us directly to the proposal that art is mimetic and brings us to the second chapter focusing on mimesis.

The second chapter started by introducing Plato and Aristotle's definition of mimesis and its unavoidability in art. Plato famously banishes poets, for he thinks art is mimesis and mimesis is dangerous. In Republic III, he considers poetry as impersonation and worries that the teens performing the poetry will assimilate into the behaviors of their evil roles in the play. In Republic X, Plato focuses on a second feature of mimesis, representation, and claims that false representation can convince the world falsely to its audience and is a form of deception. Aristotle expands on Plato's definition and embraces mimesis, as mimicking is one of the first behaviors a newborn exclusively has as a higher animal. He claims that art is representational in different

ways and proposes three distinguishers: means, object, and manner. The object of mimesis, as Aristotle claims, can be either better, worse or the same as us. Woodruff builds on the claim and speculates that the object of mimesis can be entirely made-up and still make authentic mimesis. I disagree with him and argue that there is no complete made-up or fictionality; all fictionality is filled with existential import, making it a mimicry of reality; fictional things as objects of mimesis are only rendered more authentic due to their role as a symbol. With a deeper understanding of mimesis's role in art, I moved on to explain why and how art is mimetic.

After distinguishing merited art from its philosophical approaches and purposeful but not recognized art, I described the multiple bonds art has that located it far away from innovation, the opposition of mimesis. The historical motivations, the outpour of personal feelings and events, and the desire for success in the industry are inexorably present in every piece and firmly ground art to a mimetic nature. I exemplified the theory by pointing out the presence of the three elements in Kirchner's painting *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Then, I divided art into three time periods and explained the general objects each mimicked; in general, the three time periods fall under Aristotle's take on mimesis in art, as "either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be"⁸⁸. The body of the essay ends by pointing out that contemporary art mimics existing art.

To firmly establish the abovementioned claims, I have rushed many concepts, flattened complexities, and over-summarized many specifics in this essay. All the exceptions to those generalized claims are significant and can be dealt with another time. I cannot agree with an anti-essentialist approach to identifying art, but art can be anything despite the common denominator of recognition by the industry and its mimetic nature, and I'm glad that there are at

⁸⁸ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1460 b.

least those two things that grounded it, especially in this era. This is a deeply personal essay, and to hesitate between the stand of critique or non-critique of contemporary art is me waddling between the identity of a philosophy student and an art student. From a philosophical point of view, there is a layering of mimesis in contemporary art; to be mimetic of past art is to mimic other mimesis. It can be said that art that directly mimics reality is a great book, and art that mimics past art tears the pages off of great books, binds them, and hopes that it tells a story. It is the difference between a film and an unintentional montage from pieces of its footage presented as a film. Art that mimics reality constantly invents new languages, and art that mimics past arts uses them. The difference in significance reveals itself in these analogies; the latter is evidently secondary and less significant. However, how could the term “secondary” describe works applauded in an industry that thrives like never before? The industry is autonomous and generally unaffected by philosophical critiques. I discontinued making art because I was unwilling to see myself mimicking past art, but it seems that the industry is quite accepting of that sort of mimesis. Should I, or can I suppress my philosophical standpoint that art I can make is secondary and indulge in an industry that increasingly believes all existence is reasonable? In graduating college and starting a new chapter of life, I am more than eager to find out.

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