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Balancing Modernist Structures with Destructuring: A Philosophical Exploration of Art

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Balancing Modernist Structures with Destructuring:
A Philosophical Exploration of Art

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts and the Division of the Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

Looking through the history of philosophy, we can easily tell that Western and Eastern thinkers started with dramatically different focuses. Not to place a binary dynamic between the two, but Western classics - Plato and Aristotle, for example - do possess the tendency to orient their thinking around abstracting reality and creating a structure that seemingly applies universally. This hypothetical structure is usually regarded as “truth,” and the tendency, “idealism.” The belief in structural objectivity becomes an underlying factor in the search for truth; and logic, a system that is capable of testing whether something is true according to the system itself, becomes the basic principle of Western rationality and therefore radiates its presence everywhere in Western culture and lifestyle. Modernism is a great example: in the past two centuries, science and the belief that science has to be true and is capable of explaining and achieving everything have largely reassigned the agent of “truth” from God to society. In French philosopher Bruno Latour’s definition, the modernist constitution sets up a structural division between nature and culture, situating nature as “other.” The death of the transcendent God distances Him from both nature and society, thus spirituality and religion became separate categories. Modernism also embraces the belief in progress, which suggests that we are absolutely moving forward and bettering our lives through modernization, through situating ourselves around taller buildings and more effective machines. These ideas end up underlying our modern everyday lives.

Even language, the one precious device that we utilize to make sense of the world and communicate with one another, is inevitably a subject of such idealist

tendencies. Take English as an example: having learned it as a second language, it always fascinates me how precise it is. English is largely a reductive language; it pairs up perfectly with logic and is particularly suited to seemingly objective statements. Every word in a sentence specifies and therefore reduces the possible meaning suggested; every sentence serves as a basic unit of expression following a precise syntactic structure. In contrast, Chinese is a very additive or connotative language; each character consists of various symbolic gestures, which contribute a chunk of associations to each word that may or may not be addressed depending on the context. In Middle Chinese or Ancient Chinese, a word is a basic unit of expression, and grammar is largely about how the word is situated within a conventional order and what the order implies. The structure implied in this order is empirical and mostly acts as a reference; it becomes a part of the context that contributes to the overall delivery. One is free to skip a noun or a verb, place an adverb before or after a verb, switch the object with the subject of the sentence, use a noun as a verb and a verb as an adjective, and so forth. Therefore, the meaning of a Chinese sentence is largely dependent on the context in which a sentence or word is said and therefore results in large spaces of ambiguity.

Again, here I do not intend to set up a binary dynamic between the two cultures, nor am I trying to praise one but not the other. In fact, from the start of globalization, such a dynamic has shifted dramatically. Ever since the emergence of modernism in China after the Qing Dynasty was forced to open up after the Opium Wars, science and logical thinking gradually became the most popular religion and the most convincing source of authority, as empirical thinking seemed to be way less useful, effective, and

convincing in technological development. On the other hand, the direct consequences of structural thinking, Western rationality, and modernism, including the two World Wars that took place in the twentieth century as well as the rapid climate change that happened in the past hundred years, demonstrate a certain urgency to explore alternative ways of thinking. After all, structural philosophical thinking tends to reject certain possibilities that fail to be proven by logic, while the rejection of multiple truths almost always results in tunnel vision. Concepts are naturally extreme, and especially so in English. The linguistic structure as well as the idealist tendency constantly encourages absolutism, which in the end becomes a significant factor that shapes our behaviors. Structures are undoubtedly helpful in our understanding and utilization of the world, but we also have to recognize their limitations and consequences. Power perpetuates through structures; structures embrace homogeneity.

In this situation, it does seem like there is an urgent need for us to step back from the various structures that we have been born into, to find a subtle balance through deconstructing. However, such a solidified modern social dynamic only makes it more and more difficult, and perhaps absurd, for one to destructure oneself in society. Individuals are mostly powerless against the all-powerful society that “conquered” all-powerful nature in a modernist framework. Since power also perpetuates through the perpetuation of structures, it does seem like there is nothing we can do about the situation, and that there can be no exploration of alternative ways of thinking other than conceptualizing things differently to address certain perspectives, as what philosophers have been doing in the past two hundred years. After all, it is already absurd for one to attempt to identify influences of structural thinking and separate those influences from

one's behavior while being situated as an active part of modern society, obligated to labor in order to survive.

Take an ongoing conversation in philosophy today as an example: Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) counters modern structures by implementing a flat ontology on reality, regarding all objects similarly while expanding the definition of objects. It is a perspective that effectively deconstructs reality by de-centering hierarchy and anthropocentrism, yet it is also practically useless, as it doesn't quite translate into a systematic practice in our structural society. It becomes more of a post-post-modern reflection that aims at reapproaching Kantian finitude with an emphasis on object-object relationships instead of human-object relationships. It does set up the condition in which possibilities limited by anthropocentrism in modernity could be opened up; but the question remains: who is it to understand the theory and act on opening up such possibilities in a way that is accessible to the general public?

In other words, if OOO, or philosophy in general, remains largely active only in academia and separated from everyone's modern everyday life as it is now, it would remain accessible only to few who are knowledgeable, interested, and usually privileged; it would remain as an inspiration for them without demonstrating what a practice of deconstructing looks like. Moreover, implementing a simplified, flat structure instead of an idealized structure still rejects certain possibilities according to the underlying influences of structures. In this case, it does seem as if escapism was the only way out: as one withdraws oneself from society and disappears into the woods, the need for structure ceases to exist.

In fact, this awkward situation has been a part of an ongoing intellectual discussion that is postmodernism, which is largely characterized by its skeptical view towards modernism and the Enlightenment worldview. However, quite like how OOO is situated, postmodernist criticism tends to be hollow and unimpactful in a utilitarian sense. This issue comes directly from the fact that postmodernists who question modernist values and structures are still inevitably situated in modernist structures. As articulated by Latour, "Postmodernism is a symptom, not a fresh solution. It lives under the modern Constitution, but it no longer believes in the guarantees the Constitution offers. It senses that something has gone awry in the modern critique, but it is not able to do anything but prolong that critique, though without believing in its foundations."¹ In this case, since postmodernism emerges within modern society and is based on modernist practice, and since modernist practice is largely conditioned by society and therefore power (which perpetually benefits from modernist structures,) it inevitably ends up becoming disillusioned complaints that fail to be translated into alternative practice.

However, there remains one practice, although flawed, that allows empirical explorations of destructuring, that provides the general public with access to seeing such explorations taking place. It operates similarly to the convention of lab science, in which scientists conduct experiments based on the hypothesis they came up with and present the result through either a presentation or a science journal. The result, almost becomes independent from the scientist once published, then possesses the potential to be widely accepted by the general public. That practice is the practice of art, a

¹Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 3. print. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994). 46.

convention that orients around the dynamic between presentation and perception/experience of objects. As articulated by Graham Harman, “In what sense is aesthetics first philosophy? Precisely in the sense that artworks are irreducible to clear propositional claims.”² In practice of art, the artist transforms various materials into a work of art based on their ideas, feelings, intentions, intuitions, etc. They then present the result of their interactions to their audiences, ideally the general public, through their exhibitions, publications, or digital media. One significant benefit of this convention is that, in the act of presenting things to be perceived and experienced, the artist and the curator possess dominant agency over the condition of the audience’s experience and what is to be experienced. According to the convention, the audiences are supposed to go into the exhibition with a suspension of disbelief as well as a heightened state of awareness, opening themselves up to an unforeseen experience.

This dynamic allows for largely destructured experiences to take place within structures; on a larger scale, the convention of arts can be understood as one of the necessary expenditures of excessive energy that circulates the Earth. French philosopher Georges Bataille categorizes economic expenditure into productive and non-productive ones in his *The Accursed Share*: while production, labor, utility, objective reality are considered a part of “restricted economy” and therefore “productive,” things like consumption, luxury, and art are considered “non-productive expenditure.”³ French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss uses the scientific term “entropy” to describe this necessary, non-productive expenditure. In short, as human activities and the progression of society is largely characterized by negentropy, the measurement of

²Christoph Cox et al., eds., *Realism Materialism Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015). 100.

³Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*. 1: Consumption (New York: Zone Books, 2007). 1.

structured order and normality, it also necessarily involves entropy, the inevitable tendency towards chaos and non-structure. Sacrificing, loss, consumption, destruction, waste, and art - these notions outline the entropy of general economy in opposed on restricted economy. This framework suggests the necessity of practicing destructuring in our society, as with negentropic progression of modern society comes entropy, which, without a proper outlet, often manifests itself as war. We would want to reach a subtle balance between entropy and negentropy in our daily practices, which makes the practice of art a significant counter-force of the negentropical, structured society. This is especially a helpful framework in considering how the modernist belief in structural thinking meets its consequences.

Noteworthy, not only does Bataille's framework demonstrates the impracticality of absolute order entailed by modernist structures and the need to destructure it in practice, but it also situates reality in the "middle way," as suggested in Eastern Philosophy including Buddhism and Daoism. In Bataille's words, "[...] real life, composed of all sorts of expenditures, knows nothing of purely productive expenditure; in actuality, it knows nothing of purely nonproductive expenditure either."⁴ Here we can identify a dynamic in which a destructured, unidealized practice in reality manifests, a dynamic that actively balances order with chaos, negentropy with entropy, and structure with non-structure. After all, the Chinese word for "things in reality" or "matter" is "东西," which directly translates to "East West." This suggests the same way of understanding both sides of a binary system as coexisting and operating simultaneously in a balanced state, resulting in "things in reality."

⁴Bataille, *The Accursed Share*. 1, 12.

One particular art movement that embodies this dynamic to a profound extent is minimal art, which I will discuss in my first chapter. In analyzing the approaches of minimal art, I am going to focus on two thinkers who demonstrate very different perspectives, Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss. Fried's understanding of the mode of perception suggested by minimal art pairs interestingly with Krauss's take on how minimalism demonstrates a delimited and open-ended notion of self. With a focus on viewer's experience and interactions with the artworks, the exhibition space and how the pieces are situated spatially becomes significant. Current conventions around the presentation of art tends to suspend each pieces with abundant space surrounding them; this convention demonstrates certain idealist tendency and seems to respond particularly to the dynamic between buyer and seller that inevitably overlaps the dynamic between the artist and the audience. The individual artworks occupy their spaces with absolute dominance while avoiding interactions that could potentially downplay their values. We would hope for art to be "pure," to be nothing more than explorations, expressions, and presentations, but we do live in a capitalist society, and art is inevitably a business. Therefore, in my second chapter, I will focus on various curatorial approaches that destructure such conventions and aim to construct an open-ended space that reflects reality and real-life experiences with honesty and precision. I will identify two main approaches, breaking divisions between binary oppositions and situating structures as references, through exemplifying two exhibitions, *A Lot of People* by Rirkrit Tiravanija and *Cities on the Move* curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Olbrich. Finally, in the past twenty years, the internet emerged as an alternative, de-centered platform for public presentation, which have opened up numerous

possibilities. I will dive deeper into the digital world, looking forward to the future possibilities in my conclusion.

For the rest of this introduction, I would like to bring to attention a phenomenological framework as it particularly encourages us to focus on our bodily experiences and perception without having to engage certain structures. I will situate my exploration around this framework. To start with, one of the most significant turning points in Western contemporary philosophy happened when Kant established his framework that sets apart the noumenal from the phenomenal, which effectively de-centered the notion of objective truth to the noumenal world, one that we do not have access of. This moment marks a redirection in the focus of Western philosophy from constructing an idealist structure that underlies reality perfectly and is capable of explaining everything to approaching reality and our experiences in the phenomenal world with a perspective that reveals or addresses certain values or issues. This mode of philosophy emphasizes our experiences in reality that don't necessarily involve structure; it is particularly empirical compared to the previous truth-seeking model, aiming to identify and get rid of artificial assumptions from the history of philosophy to return our focus to honest reflections of our everyday lives. Following such a framework, one of the most important figures in the study of the phenomena is Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Here I will give a brief summary of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. To resist scientific objectivity and René Descartes' perspective of mind-body dualism that was popularized in the Enlightenment period, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes our "living body", one that is both a subject and an object and that we exclusively base

our experiences and thoughts on, one that sees and is seen, one that is “an intertwining of vision and movement.”⁵ Based on this framework, “to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body.”⁶ If I perceive an object, say, a bookshelf as I am standing in front of it, I have a bookshelf in mind that is “the perceived thing”. But what I have in my field of vision is a perspectival view of the front side of the bookshelf, and if I move from my initial position, the spatial relation I have with the bookshelf changes, and I continuously see new views of the bookshelf. Therefore, “The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect. [...] It is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question.”⁷ As I move around the bookshelf, my mind incorporates different snapshots of the object from every viewpoint that I pass through to make up the perception I have of the bookshelf.

Importantly, perception is not necessarily based on vision, so it is helpful to differentiate the two. An example that demonstrates the distinction between the two would be that, in bright light, people with glasses can sometimes see objects’ outlines that are filled with warm and cold colors on each side, while usually, their perception of the object would disregard the outline. Seeing, from the scientific perspective, involves a series of physical-chemical reactions routinely performed by our brains. The light that reaches our eyes is transformed into nerve signals and subsequently decoded by our brains to yield meaningful information about our surroundings. The act of seeing is

⁵Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie, 6. print, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern Univ. Pr, 1982). 162.

⁶Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 42.

⁷Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

continuous and can be passive or active. On the other hand, while our perception could be based on what we see, it could also be based on any of our senses such as hearing and touching. Perception is usually active, as to perceive is to incorporate and synthesize various information to form a comprehensive mental image that defines the object in question.

Therefore, every single object in this world, as we know of, is a part of our perception, as Merleau-Ponty articulates, “The perceived thing [...] exists only insofar as someone can perceive it. I cannot even for an instant imagine an object in itself.”⁸ One might find this interesting through its connections to the observer effect in quantum physics, that the act of observation alters, and therefore specifies, the behavior of the particles being observed; in this case, the presence of objects in our world relies on whether we can perceive it, and different perceivers would observe the same object in the world differently. Therefore, the sum of everything that we are able to perceive constitutes the world that we experience, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “The world is the totality of perceptible things, ‘the thing of all things’ [...] (it) must be understood as [...] the universal style of all perceptions.”⁹

It is worth noting that the result of this perception, the “perceived object,” is neither a representation of the actual object nor a result of an intellectual analysis according to given “laws” of how things are oriented. Seeing the front side of the bookshelf, instead of positing an opposite side of the shelf as a part of the representation, I actually see the bookshelf as possessing a specific opposite side. The back side of the shelf, in this case, is merely “hidden from view” rather than imaginary.

⁸Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 15.

⁹Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

On the other hand, it is also possible for me to “know” that the shelf must have an opposite side based on the front side that I see. But this seems rather an intellectual analysis than perception: I “know” there is an opposite side of the object according to a certain formula that “it is true that my water bottle, my laptop, and this door have an opposite side, it is true that every object has its opposite side from one viewpoint, therefore it is true that this bookshelf has an opposite side.” But “laws” like such do not correspond with what is given by perception. Perception does not provide “truth” or “laws” or “patterns”, but only presences.

This leads to a paradox Merleau-Ponty addressed, “the quasi-organic relation of the perceiving subject and the world involves, in principle, the contradiction of immanence and transcendence.[...] Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence because it always contains something more than what is given.”¹⁰ If there is a “perceived object” that is present and that is not a representation, why would it be the case that there is always more details and aspects to the object I have not seen? If I have not positioned myself on every single possible viewpoint to see the object, how come there is a holistic “perceived object” in my mind without me intellectually constructing it based on my knowledge of what it should be like? Additionally, if the perceived object is a representation, it is private to me and only I know what it is like; if the perceived object is a result of an intellectual synthesis, every intellect should be able to perceive and communicate with each other the exact same perception, and therefore the experienced world would be ideal and always rational. In reality, we can certainly share and communicate our perceived object, but what is perceived by different people from the same object differs.

¹⁰Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 12–16.

To approach this paradox, Merleau-Ponty introduced a specific “practical synthesis” that is based on one’s bodily mobility and the possibility of “I can”. “It is thus necessary,” he writes, “that, in the perception of another, I find myself in relation with another ‘myself,’ who is, in principle, open to the same truths as I am, in relation to the same being that I am.”¹¹ The unseen side of the bookshelf is real and present. To see it, I know based on my familiarity of my body that I would just have to move the bookshelf a little bit or walk to a different angle. “Moving the bookshelf” or “relocating myself” amounts to a form of seeing myself in relation to myself in space, insofar as it involves me seeing myself in a different spatial relation to the bookshelf. Since our practical synthesis is based on our experience with spatial relations, we should clarify how we perceive space according to Merleau-Ponty.

As a significant framework for Merleau-Ponty, the Kantian space is considered one of the three fundamental categories our mind makes to form our experiences. From Kant’s viewpoint, we cannot understand and interact with the world how we do without our minds organizing incoming information with spatial relations. This is almost exactly what Merleau-Ponty regards as “bodily space” or “oriented space,” in contrast to “objective space”, which is considered “spatiality of position.” Objective space is the ideal space in which everything takes fixed positions, which, similar to Kant’s noumenal world, exists in theory but is certainly not perceivable. According to Merleau-Ponty, “I cannot even for an instant imagine an object in itself,” this objective space is certainly inaccessible and unimaginable to us.

However, we do like to refer to it for the sake of conceptualization and communication. In practice, we tend to refer to and represent space with seemingly

¹¹Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 17.

objective structures. A map from a top-down view or bird's eye view, for instance, aims to represent objects' spatial positions most accurately and objectively. Still, it is not in any way an objective space that is represented, but rather the oriented space perceived from the top. On the other hand, "bodily space" or "spatiality of situation" is what we experience from our bodily perspectives, in which the body is a subject that perceives and also an object that takes up space just like everything else. When the living body is engaged in a space, it displays various orientated distinctions regarding the spatial situations of the body, such as top and down, right and left, inside and outside, etc. which allows us to orient ourselves within the space in relation to other objects and to synthesize possible viewpoints based on our mobilities in space. Therefore, we are able to recognize our capacity to envision the world from alternative perspectives, wherein our understanding of our interactions with the world practically synthesizes various potential subjective viewpoints alongside the more traditional isolated view of the singular subject.

In this case, this idea of the practical synthesis therefore de-centers the role of logical and representative structures in our perception of reality by resorting to the empirical. In Merleau-Ponty's articulation, "bodily mobility," one's understanding of the capacity of one's physical body, becomes a key reference that underlies our experiences as we are situated in certain spaces. Such an understanding can only be empirical, as it comes from a sense of familiarity with how our bodies occupy space. This shift from structural thinking to empirical understanding can be metaphorically demonstrated by my experience with prolonged artistic practices, which is also an experience widely articulated by artists, athletes, surgeons, or really anyone who

practices certain disciplines that require hands-on work. In my experience, when I first started making music, I had much trouble hearing whatever was going on in my tracks and how that would sound to others' ears, so I started learning basic music theory from YouTube videos. After two years of following the structural theories that provided me with a sense of security in my expressions, I started noticing how much I am able to hear and articulate from various sonic gestures and understand how they contribute to the overall composition. I started intentionally forgetting the theories and playing random chords on a keyboard until they sounded good in my ears. When that practice became natural to me, my intuition replaced the structure of Western music theory, becoming my most important reference in making music. One could argue that, instead of overcoming the structural constraints of music theory, I have simply internalized them in my practice; that instead of deconstructing, I have habitualized the application of structures. Yet I would argue that, instead of the application of structure, what I have habitualized is a mode of attentive listening based on my past experiences interacting and manipulating sounds. This mode of attentive listening resembles the mode of practical synthesis. In this case, the possibilities of sounds as a result of my familiarity of certain tools (instruments, effects, etc.) are perceived the same way the possibilities of spatial occupation as a result of my familiarity with my body is perceived.

This example demonstrates the usefulness of introducing structures in certain practices, as the structures provide access to certain understandings for one who lacks certain experience that allows those understandings to naturally take place. Yet on the other hand, deconstructing allows one to be honest with their senses and express themselves in a free, unique, and creative way, opening numerous possibilities for them

while still grounded in one's experiences. This also comments on the idea of deconstruction, a key methodology for post-structuralism, and how it functions as one approach to perception, but certainly not a necessity.

Here I should also provide a brief differentiation between deconstruction and destructuring, a key term in this essay that is yet to be defined. To be straightforward: deconstruction is an approach, while destructuring is an umbrella term for any attempt to de-limit, neutralize, distance, or escape structural objectivity. As it is a verb with a clear objective, it includes any practice that points towards the direction of destructuring. Structure is not a part of things in itself, but rather an abstracted frame that contains and divides things into structural components. Our perspectives utilizes it by ascribing certain structures to make sense of things, to replace the "thing in itself" with "structure and its structural components," which is certainly more approachable conceptually. Since this ascription is helpful for us to make up certain understandings, we then make that ascription a habit and apply it on our designs. In this case, we call the structure that is fundamentally a part of the current state of a thing an "underlying structure." Therefore, this project aims to explore both destructured approaches in shaping presentations as well as destructured perspectives that unascibes certain structures from our experiences. This two-fold dynamic responds directly to the artist/curator - audience dynamic in the convention of art while reaching beyond that, as it is also relevant to our everyday experience and expression in modern society. And the goal is not necessarily "no structure at all," since the absoluteness of the lack of structure is itself a position in a structure; without structure, there should be no absoluteness. Therefore the goal instead is to reach a balance, both in our perspective and practice,

between structured approaches and non-structured approaches. In this case, the methodology of deconstruction may or may not be considered destructuring depending on the situation.

In the same music example, if one is to listen to a piece of music with a deconstructive approach, one would disassemble elements in the piece according to certain structures, which isolates each instrument and sonic gesture and therefore ends up providing a helpful format of analysis. However, since the piece of music is supposed to be presented as a whole, it loses the intricate and balanced situation each element takes up in relation to each other in this way. Applying a structure to a piece of music certainly provides the listener with a sense of clarity, yet at the same time, it distorts the piece in perception by overlaying structure onto the musical piece. In this case, ironically, the post-structural approach ends up introducing more structures rather than dissolving it. Similarly, when we perceive an object, the most efficient approach is to think of a name that applies to it; and for a complex object, we name each part that goes into it. This way, we get an immediate recognition of the objects in question.

However, there are certainly alternative ways to perceive objects, one that focuses on how the object is presented rather than conceptually what the object is. In Merleau-Ponty's framework, this translates to an "artistic vision." To see an object with an artistic vision differs from perceiving an object as art since the act of seeing makes only visual discoveries while leaving the object in question undefined. To see artistically requires an aesthetic intention and a cultivated understanding of what to look at and how to look. In his essay *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty talks about a "painterly vision" or "artistic vision," as he articulates, "(Painting) gives visible existence to what profane

vision believes to be invisible [...] This voracious vision, reaching beyond the 'visual givens', opens upon a texture of being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesura."¹² However, he also mentions that "Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world."¹³ How could there be an artistic vision that doesn't include an appropriation of what is seen but still sees something different from the untrained vision?

The answer is simple: we live in a world where every object possesses numerous, perhaps infinite details that are usually not seen at first glance. Although everything within the perspectival view that one sees is "visually given", and therefore accessible to sight, the untrained eye is tempted to recognize what the object "is," while the artistic vision is experienced enough to remain in a state of constant discovery. To be specific, as one organizes the totality of indefinite numbers of perspectival views to make up an object that is perceived, visual aspects that constitute one's vision of the object "hide itself in making the object perceivable."¹⁴ On the other hand, the artist's vision expands beyond the often conceptual perception of the "object". According to Merleau-Ponty, "Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color, all the objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence [...] (and are) not seen by everyone. The painter's gaze asks them what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be this thing, what they do to compose this worldly talisman and to make us see the visible."¹⁵ Since the world is a totality of perceptible things, the

¹²Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 166.

¹³Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 162.

¹⁴Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 167.

¹⁵Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 166.

artist's perception of the object that includes all those ghostly aspects is what allows them to become present. As "Matter is 'pregnant' with its form,"¹⁶ when an object enters one's perspectival view, the form as how it is seen was given birth. The forms of those ghostly aspects are real, quite like an infant within their mother's womb: the moment that they are seen makes them present and therefore marks the birth of a child. For one with an artistic vision, the moment of "birth" takes place continuously, as more and more unseen aspects become apparent.

This mode of perception also points us in a deeper direction. In Michael Fried's take on the phenomenology of perception, he comments on the condition of object as such: "What replaces the object - what does the same job of distancing or isolating the beholder, of making him a subject [...] - is above all the endlessness, or the objectlessness, of the approach or onrush or perspective."¹⁷ In this case, Fried differentiates subject from object with the "endlessness of perspective" - or, to be clear, the fact that we can perceive from endless viewpoints in our experiences. This claim seems to be based on Merleau-Ponty's practical synthesis, which informs us that we who experience ourselves moving around the object is the subject - and therefore is different from the object. But this sense of endlessness goes deeper when conceptual thinking becomes a part of the experience. If we are to understand the articulation of an aspect from an object as a reductive act - a level of abstraction that isolates certain properties from the object - we can easily find out that there is no end to such a reduction. We always end up with a holistic object that is irreducible to a sum of qualities, and a bundle of qualities can never turn into an object that possesses such

¹⁶Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

¹⁷Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 159.

qualities. One might stop the abstraction after they have named everything that could possibly be considered aspects of the object, but this comes from their lack of vocabulary rather than lacking things to articulate. Eventually, they might have a fine taste of sublimity, the feeling one gets when faced with things that are beyond our capabilities to comprehend. Certainly, the term “sublime” is commonly used at a particular moment in art history, when nature is closely associated with God and his omnipotent power. Yet it should still be appropriate to describe the idea of infinity as such. Object in itself suggests infinity: we are free to perceive it in different ways, contexts, or scales, and there is always more for us to perceive and conceptualize. One could relate personal experiences to aspects of the object and give it new meaning, walk around the object to see different views of it, or zoom in and observe quantum that becomes observable through the act of perception, etc. which all open up realms of possibilities that the object holds. Therefore, this seemingly reductive act of perceiving and naming aspects is, in fact, connotative: the concepts articulated represent certain aspects of the object without taking anything away from the object; the object offers infinite things one could perceive. By naming an aspect from an object, one invents such an aspect based on the object, which becomes a part of its infinite possibility.

But our minds cannot comprehend infinity as it is. We actively avoid infinity by implementing ideas that make us seemingly understand the unknowable, which represents the unknowable and therefore evades it. The concept of infinity is an obvious example: by imagining a boundlessly perpetuating count that represents a number that is “ideally” large and unmeasurable, we avoid the number itself. In fact, we have no idea

what “infinity” is like besides how it functions as an ideal token in a mathematic equation.

The idea of sublimity does not come from the idea of infinity, but rather the feeling of facing something incomprehensible; quite like how our scale compares to the Earth, the Earth compared to the Sun, the Sun compared to, say, the black hole in NGC 7727, so on and so forth. Arguably, however, by evading the incomprehensible, this approach ensures that we can focus on what is comprehensible at the moment rather than getting lost among the unnamed unknowables, which certainly sounds nihilistic and overwhelmingly sublime. In my opinion, these two approaches - evading the unknown and the unknowable with representation and emphasizing them with presentation - demonstrate distinct significance. The first is a modernist approach: it is characterized by anthropocentrism with a focus on utilitarianism and is undoubtedly helpful for technological advancement. It tends to situate the unknown as a part of nature while simultaneously encouraging us to avoid it, as it seems irrelevant to us in society. The application of the first approach - applying structure to situate parts of reality in different categories - built its momentum day by day since the Enlightenment period, or even since Aristotle separated object from subject. To this point, it has become a modern habit to apply structures where they are certainly unnecessary.

On the other hand, the second aims to approach reality as it is, or in this case, with a destructured condition. It often emerges in the cultural realm as it is not oriented toward utility, yet it recognizes the consequence of Western utilitarianism and therefore questions and seeks alternative possibilities for how we think and experience the world. This essay will focus on practices that demonstrate this approach in one way or another,

specifically in the realm of contemporary art. In this case, minimalism naturally becomes a significant artistic style of practice following the second approach, which reflects on the consequences of Western institutional structures by focusing on cherishing the infinite possibilities held within specific objects.

Chapter 1

In my introduction, we have explored how postmodernism fails to provide practical alternatives to modernism and Western idealist structures, as it emerged from within a modernist society; although postmodernists don't believe in the modern constitution, it inevitably relies on modernist structures to make sense. This has led us to focus on the idea and practice of deconstructing, which usually manifests in the way of seeking a balance between structured and non-structure. One significant philosophy that particularly deconstructs Western idealist frameworks would be Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, in which he introduces the idea of the practical synthesis, orienting our perceptions around our bodily mobility that is based on spatial relations. He also emphasizes real object's infinite potential to be conceptualized in articulating his "artist's vision," which provides a suitable framework for minimal art.

Here I should further articulate why I've decided to focus on minimal art, or art in general, in my exploration of deconstructing reality.

As the history of art progresses, especially after the emergence of photography and film, art is no longer limited to the tradition of craftsmanship or the role of an aesthetic object. There are numerous attempts at a universal definition of art, but they do seem ineffective, especially because of the continuous practice and evolution of art. By the time an art theory is constructed, there are probably already artists somewhere experimenting with new materials or formats that the theory fails to respond to. For this reason, I am not going to argue whether a piece is qualified as a piece of art; we will just regard it as art for the sake of convenience. Instead, I am going to focus on the aspect

in which the convention of art allows the artist to set up a condition that situates the viewer in particular experiences or perspectives.

In his *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Arthur Danto famously claimed that “When art internalizes its own history, when it becomes self-conscious of its history as it has come to be in our time so that its consciousness of its history forms part of its nature, it is perhaps unavoidable that it should turn into philosophy at last.”¹⁸ This idea, as a part of his institutional theory of art, reflects on the turning point of art history as mentioned earlier. Yet I would argue that art is certainly different from philosophy and would not turn into philosophy any time soon. Philosophy aims to conceptualize reality and our experiences; art takes place in an experience or an interaction with an object or digital object that situates the audience to a certain understanding or feeling. This is not to define art pieces as intentional objects that should be unpacked precisely as intended; yet a good artwork should be able to evoke something in the (intended) viewer’s minds as a result of their perception. Therefore art differs from philosophy both ontologically and in practice: an art piece is an object in reality that is, in theory, capable of being conceptualized infinitely while remaining inexhaustible; on the other hand, art lacks the clarity that philosophical writing possesses. However, it becomes more and more clear how many similarities exist between art and philosophy, as they both stimulate certain perspectives or reflections on their audiences. As the word “philosophy,” or “*philosophia*” means “love of wisdom” in its original context, and wisdom comes from experiences, it is almost as if the artist is a philosopher who makes things that demonstrate the “philosophy” in a non-verbalized fashion (by setting up a condition

¹⁸Arthur Coleman Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia Classics in Philosophy (New York [: Columbia University Press, 2005). 176.

that situates contemplation), and the philosopher, an artist who articulates their reflections through writing. Moreover, as Graham Harman speaks on the limitations of clear, propositional writings, especially in analytic philosophy in his conversation with Christoph Cox and Jenny Jaskey, “the world is made of objects, not propositions [...] we can already see this in everyday language, where innuendos, hints, metaphors, and strategic silences are often more powerful means of communication than clear propositional statements. [...] one of the greatest causes of banality in intellectual life is surely premature clarity.”¹⁹ In this case, it becomes obvious how the underlying assumption of objectivity in Western philosophy and linguistic systems as well as the drive for structural objectivity results in a maze of highly abstracted concepts that is ironically ineffective by the means of communication, which ends up pulling us further away from reality. As soon as one makes a statement with an intention of achieving absolute clarity, they almost always reduce philosophy to something like a mathematical equation or logical calculation that appears objective, which further abstracts the idea they had in the first place. Concepts are naturally extreme, but reality itself is neither absolute nor extreme. It is irreducible to a sum of statements or qualities. Reality is situated in the “middle way,” as mentioned in my introduction. Propositional statement is the format of “truth,” not reality.

Therefore, instead of further conceptualizing ideas that are already conceptualized, it might be more helpful for us to focus on art after all. In this case, minimal art naturally becomes a style or movement that comprehensively demonstrates an ongoing exploration of de-centering institutional structures and maintaining a sense of natural ambiguity, as “less is more:” by presenting objects without excessive details,

¹⁹Cox et al., *Realism Materialism Art*, 100.

the artist effectively avoids distractions that could distance the viewers from the object itself and the possibilities it can hold. In Donald Judd's words, "Rather than inducing idealization and generalization and being allusive, it excludes. [...] It becomes an object of its own right."²⁰ This intentional exclusion of allusions sets up a meditative condition in which the audiences are encouraged to engage the object by itself without much identification or association. By evading being identified, the object also becomes almost too ambiguous to be categorized. This creates a condition in which Merleau-Ponty's "artist's vision" becomes a suitable and significant mode of perception that allows for audiences' visual discoveries on the specific object while suppressing their modern habits to categorize. In the end, the object becomes a real entity that is capable of generating visual and ontological properties infinitely.

The object confronts the viewer in its space, demanding attention on its physical presence; the object's lack of metaphor and identifiable content situates it not as an object of conceptualization, so it rejects any attempt to evading it through representation. Therefore, minimal art embraces an alternative model of artistic expression and appreciation: instead of focusing on how a piece of art undergoes an ontological transfiguration that makes it more than just an object, minimal art emphasizes the artwork's condition as an object and situates the viewer to contemplate such a condition in relation to one's physical body, which is also an object.

Up to this point, one might be tempted to ask: what about specific objects, like a wooden block or metal bars stacked on top of each other, that is capable of demonstrating certain ideas or understandings that are not a part of their visual

²⁰Annie Ochmanek and Alex Kitnick, eds., Donald Judd, *October Files* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021). 5.

qualities? How does a simple object compare to a complex, unique piece of modernist painting, as they are both considered art? To answer these questions, I should dive deeper into the discussion of minimal art. Yet, to provide a context for minimal art, we should start by introducing what precedes it, namely modernist art, and especially modernist paintings.

According to Clement Greenberg, the definition of modernist painting is that it reasserts the two-dimensionality of the picture surface, that it forces the viewers to first see the painting as a painted surface, and then as a picture. This approach separates and isolates, and therefore creates a picture plane, obligating the painting to offer a space that resides metaphorically within the painted surface in which the presentation takes place. As a modernist thinker, in his book *Art and Objecthood*, Michael Fried argues in favor of this conventional model of art. He regards minimal art as a kind of “literalist art”, which in this case refers to the approach of art that emphasizes, rather than suspends, objecthood and theatricality. “Literalist art,” in contrast to “illusionist art,” implies that the artist intends that the object presented is understood literally, as opposed to recognizing depictions and representations. This choice of vocabulary also demonstrates Fried’s interest in the first approach, as “literal,” as opposed to “illusion,” appears particularly limited, as if one can only read so much from an object when approached literally. In other words, it doesn’t necessarily regard the possibilities to be developed, but rather “literal”: the object is what it is and isn’t what it isn’t. In fact, in his articulation of the inexhaustibility of object, he mentions, “It is inexhaustible, however, not because of any fullness - that is the inexhaustibility of art - but because there is nothing there to exhaust. It is endless the way a road might be, if it were circular, for

example.”²¹ This is a very clear statement on how he considers minimal art meaningless, as it suggests to the audiences a literal approach while providing nothing “literal” to look at.

Technically, minimalists do tend to experience the object “literally,” but with a focus that “what it is” doesn’t have to follow certain conventional structures that allow things to be widely and conceptually considered “meaningful.” In Donald Judd’s words, “It isn’t necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting.”²² In this case, Judd articulates his focus on the object as a holistic entity rather than a sum of complex details, which demonstrates his approach to minimal art.

Back to Fried’s framework: Fried considers “Objecthood” the condition of an object; modernist painting suspends objecthood for “it confronts the demand that [it] holds as shapes.”²³ In other words, one must recognize that the art takes place on the painted surface in order to not see the painting as merely a framed canvas with lines and colors. By obligating art objects with a suspension of its objecthood, Fried places a separation between art and object, situating art as fundamentally “more than just object.”

“Theatricality” is the condition of a theater, particularly the aspect in which the audiences are present in the same space and dimension where the art happens and are considered both a actor in the art presentation and an audience that sees the art simultaneously. Modernist painting requires the viewer to first recognize the two-dimensionality of the picture surface, which distances the audience’s space from

²¹Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 166.

²²Donald Judd, *Donald Judd Writings* (New York, NY: David Zwirner Books, 2018)., 142.

²³Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 151.

the space where the art resides; in this case, a viewer of modernist painting adopts a particular mode of perception that encourages the viewer to travel that distance to see the piece as if they were in the picture plane. The mode of perception is considered “absorption.”

Literalist art, on the other hand, involves the object, the viewer, and the space: it happens in the exhibition space where the object confronts the audience. This dynamic, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, can be articulated as “inherence of the see-er in the seen.” As one approaches the situation with a focus on the object in question, one remains aware of how one acts in this theatrical situation. One perceives the situation while perceiving how one plays a part in the situation, as everything one sees sustains a spatial relationship to one’s living body. This mode of perception also suggests a similar, de-centered ontology to OOO. As one sees oneself playing into a situation, one situates oneself as an object quite like everything else that one perceives, and thus is capable of seeing oneself in relation to others in opposed to only seeing others in relation to oneself. This capability itself also suggest an approach to breaking down the modernist separation between humans and nature, as it no longer functions based on a subject-object relationship. By recognizing oneself as an object, one could therefore easily sees both society and nature as “other,” which results in a unified, anarchical ontology of the world.

Eventually, Fried argues in favor of modernist painting that “what has compelled modernist painting to defeat or suspend its own objecthood is not just developments internal to itself, but the same general, enveloping, infectious theatricality that corrupted literalist sensibility in the first place and in the grip of which the developments in

question - and modernist painting in general - are seen as nothing more than an un compelling and prescienceless kind of theater.”²⁴ In this case, he considers the “corrupted literalist sensibility”²⁵ a consequence of the emergence of minimal art, which invites an alternative mode of perception from which modernist painting loses its significance.

In this case, Michael Fried’s argument on minimal art can also be considered a modernist comment on postmodernism, especially on how it fails to respond practically to the underlying modernist structures. From this perspective, applying destructural approaches to pre-existing structures only renders the product of such structures meaningless. However, one significant difference between the culture of art and society is that the former encourages alternative practices or approaches to be introduced, while in contrast, the latter tends to perpetuate the status quo. One could not function in a modernist society without following its structural conventions since otherwise one would not be able to obtain basic means of sustaining such as nourishment. It is indeed different in the artworld, as what defines an artist today is largely their unique style.

In my opinion, therefore, there is no point in questioning whether a new approach applies to the old conventions in the practice of art; the product of the old convention is intended to be approached in its conventional way, while the new product comes with its own convention and culture. Perhaps it is most appropriate to borrow Donald Judd’s words, that “new work always involves objections to the old, but these objections are really relevant only to the new. They are a part of it. [...] New inconsistencies and limitations aren’t retroactive; they concern only work that is being developed.”²⁶

²⁴Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 161.

²⁵Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 161.

²⁶Judd, *Donald Judd Writings*, 135.

Take my experience with *Danaë* by James Turrell [see figure 1] as an example for this: before entering the space, I was instructed to “slowly walk up and touch the piece.” As I was approaching the piece which is also the only light source in the space, my senses were awakened with my awareness heightened, focusing on the blue square in front of my eyes while anticipating “What is it that I am going to touch?” By following the instruction of “walking up slowly,” the time I took to move through the room was emphasized, which allowed me to stay in a state of hyperawareness while suspending the process of perception. The instruction to “touch the piece,” on the other hand, implied that the piece has a physical presence, which was certainly misleading: by eventually touching the piece, I discovered that it was a framed space behind the wall, illuminated with even blue lights.

However, there was no better way for me to reveal this to myself than touching what I anticipated as a painted surface and realizing that I was reaching into empty space. In this case, the instruction I received prior to the experience entailed the objecthood of the piece - namely, it is not meant to be taken as a two-dimensional surface that I am not supposed to touch, but rather an object in the three-dimensional space that I can physically interact with - while the appearance of the piece as I move through the space suggests that it is nothing but a colored two-dimensional plane. Such a conflict leaves me in a state of pre-perception, in which I keep attempting to perceive based on my spatial relation with the object and my act of actively and continuously seeing until I finally can confront the object physically, which marks the end of my theatrical experience with the piece.

Indeed, as Fried claims, if *Danaë* was a piece of blue-colored modernist painting and I were to approach it the same, theatrical way, I would be disappointed at how the painting as an object is exactly what I thought it was, and that it offers nothing more as I move through the space. But here I ask: what would this installation piece look like if I were to suspend the theatricality in this experience? Is seeing the see-er necessary in this experience? In this case, what I do in the space should not matter as it is not perceived, nor perceived as a part of the experience: it should be considered what I need to do in order to get a closer look at the picture plane, and nothing more than that. In this case, I could still enjoy the unexpectedness of what the piece turns out to be. Still, if I don't see myself as if I was acting in an unpredictable theater, this literalist work turns into the most presenceless kind of painting - literally presenceless. It points to the same space that I was in, one that is utterly empty. It has nothing to offer other than being unexpected. In this case, responding to Michael Fried's argument, the example demonstrates how the theater can also be "corrupted" by the pictorial, and how a mismatched approach affects one's experience. This demonstration also speaks on Latour's idea of postmodernism as a symptom instead of a fresh solution: since postmodernism is inevitably based on the practice of modernist society, postmodern approaches seem almost always mismatched while being applied to modernist structures. On the other hand, since the mode of perception that is theatricality is applied specifically to the practice of minimal art, there is really no point talking about how the emergence of minimal art and literalist sensibility "corrupts" modernist painting.

Furthermore, Fried's standpoint demonstrates a sense of insecurity about the meaning, essence, or significance of modernist painting; and one coping mechanism for

such insecurity is to subscribe to a set of conventions that is largely agreed upon. With convention comes (rational) structure, with structure comes hierarchy, and hierarchy is particularly absolute-looking and stable enough for one to obtain a sense of security.

In contrast to Fried, Rosalind Krauss approaches minimal art from a perspective that is largely influenced by Merleau-Ponty and Donald Judd. In a way, she examines the minimalism movement from a rather Dadaist angle, considering minimal art as an attempt to reconstruct Western rationalist conventions. As Fried's perspective focuses on the conditions of one's perception of a work of art, Krauss seems to be specifically interested in how, with an anthropomorphic approach, minimalism demonstrates the notion of self differently from the demonstrations found in traditional art, particularly illusionism. In this case, minimalism becomes a style of practice that demonstrates a rejection of the essentialist notion of the idea of interior selfhood.

In articulating the interior/exterior binary dynamic suggested in traditional paintings, Krauss mentioned in her book *Passages on Modern Sculptures* that "Just as the artist is made up of a physiognomic exterior and an inner psychological space, the painting consists of a material surface and an interior which opens illusionistically behind that surface."²⁷ Therefore, the dynamic between the painted surface and the (illusion of the) world within the picture plane is understood anthropomorphically as an honest reflection of the artist's understanding of how the notion of self is constructed: there is an exterior that is one's expression and presence, and on the other side is an interior where one's psyche, one's essence resides. This dynamic also suggests a hierarchical order, that the interior self is more "real" and "essential" while the exterior is

²⁷Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 10th printing (Cambridge (Mass.) London: the MIT press, 1994). 256.

a function or an expression of the interior. In rejecting this dynamic, Krauss claims that “We are not a set of private meanings that we can choose or not choose to make public to others. We are the sum of our visible gestures. We are as available to others as to ourselves. Our gestures are themselves formed by the public world, by its conventions, its language, the repertory of its emotions, from which we learn our own.”²⁸ This perspective situates both our notions of self and various pieces of minimal art within a de-structured, empirical network of interactions. On one end of the interaction is one’s physical body as well as the physical presence of the artwork; on the other end, everything else. This network cannot be completely structural the same way reality cannot be purely structural. It is almost impossible to understand this network as a structure consists of each individual interactions, as it is impossible to identify its structural components by take into account all interactions that involves a specific object. Perhaps it is more appropriate to approach this network by identifying orders or patterns based on the sum of interactions, which is how we always already characterize others based on the sum of gestures we perceive.

It is also worth noting that this exterior understanding of the notion of self seems particularly connected to Lacan’s idea of the mirror stage, in which selfhood is deeply empirical, and that we, as infants, do not develop a barrier between the self and the world until we are regarded as a “self” conceptually. Then, we form an illusion of selfhood through learning the concept of self. Through this framework, we can notice how the “interior self” is dependent on the exterior and not vice versa, as the illusionist notion of self suggests.

²⁸Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 270.

When it comes to sculpture instead of painting, this system manifests differently while maintaining its essentialist focus. Instead of seeing a painted surface as having an interior world that is the essence of the painting, a common approach to traditional sculpture is to shape and ontologically transform the material into different kinds of metaphorical signifiers, which constitute the essence of the work. Therefore the sculpture is present in two different spaces at once: an “interior space,” in this case, a metaphorical plane, where the signified “essence” interacts with its context privately, and an exterior space where the sculpture object resides and is perceived. In this case, the latter functions as a representation of the former. As articulated by Krauss, “[minimalist artists] reacted against a sculptural illusionism which converts one material into the signifier for another: stone, for example, into flesh— an illusionism that withdraws the sculptural object from literal space and places it in a metaphorical one. These artists refused to use edges and planes to shape an object so that its external image would suggest an underlying principle of cohesion or order or tension.”²⁹

Take perhaps one of the most well-known sculptures, *Laocoön and His Sons* [see figure 2], as an example: the artists have shaped the marble material to be signifiers of various matters including human flesh, hair, snakeskin, etc. And the sum of these signifiers constitutes a scene within the metaphorical space in which Laocoön and His Sons are seemingly attacked by the snake. What happens there is private: nobody is able to see it as it is private to the sculpture, and everybody is able to imagine their own versions of it that are private to themselves.

Noteworthy, in the interior-exterior dynamic that Krauss works with, a division of space that surrounds an area is a necessary condition of the binary opposition between

²⁹Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 266.

the interior and exterior; the withdrawal of the division results in one undivided space in which both the exterior and interior ceases to exist. However, this is different from leaning into “the exterior” as one extreme in the binary opposition: since the condition of the binary dynamic, namely “division of space,” is taken out of the equation, the dynamic collapses before the space is considered “exterior space.” In other words, exterior space is not exterior space without an interior, and what is without an interior space is one unified space. Moreover, the dynamic between the interior and the exterior functions in a way that closely resembles the modernist division between society and nature. In this case, it is only when the division was present in the first place that we could position ourselves within the society and view nature in a lens of othering. If we are to review Fried’s framework, we can also notice that, although the mode of absorption and theatricality is articulated as if they were two opposites in a binary system that directs us inward (absorption) or outward (theatricality), this system certainly manifest differently from the exterior-interior dynamic. To be specific, the mode of theatricality is an outcome of a absent division that are necessary conditions for the mode of absorption, which is also why Fried claims that “theater is now the negation of art,”³⁰ and that “Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater.”³¹ Fried’s definition of art is specific as it operates particularity in a modernist structure; since the mode of theatricality operates on a more open-ended condition compared to absorption, art, specifically modernist painting, naturally degenerates when approaching a destructured condition that is suitable for a more destructured kind of art.

³⁰Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 153.

³¹Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 164.

Therefore, not only does minimal art demonstrate the turn of understanding from the internal selfhood to the selfhood that is the sum of all gestures in an anthropomorphic sense, but it also demonstrates a model that is applicable to deconstructing the modernist separation between society and nature in a metaphorical sense.

On a larger scale, perhaps it is how the Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand articulates in her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, that “Contradictions do not exist.”³² We see contradictions in structures of binary opposition; the reason why the contradiction exists in the first place is the presence of structure, just like the wall between the exterior and the interior. Structures appear transparent; it makes things seem as if they were objective. Yet once we recognize the structure behind this sense of objectivity, we understand that things are still situated somewhere in relation to the structure. One of the most significant and underlying structures is that of linguistics, which makes any contradiction possible: for example, “hot” and “cold” are contrary to each other, and “hot” and “not hot” are contradictory. In reality, “hot” and “cold” are relative; one thing is only hot when something else, perhaps the human body, is less hot compared to it. On the other hand, one thing can only be considered “not hot” when it reaches absolute zero, which is considered an ideal and is not actually possible. In a different example, quantum physics made it possible that Schrödinger’s cat can be both alive and dead at the same time, which is clearly contradictory according to linguistics. In this case, minimal art can be considered an alternative mode of presentation that aims not to subscribe to structures through real objects in a non-structural reality. The object is the

³²Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, Centennial ed., 1. Signet print., [Nachdr.], A Signet Book Signet Fiction (New York, NY: Signet Books, 1996). 188.

presentation and is not intended to be associated with any conceptual categorization. Or is it?

In my introduction, I talked about the constant balance between entropic (productive) and negentropic (productive) practices of expenditure, as well as the coexistence of entropy and negentropy within all practices in reality. Reality follows the “middle way,” one that involves a bit of everything and is never extreme. It is certainly the same case with deconstructing, as I have articulated, the goal is to reach a balance between structure and non-structure. Indeed, a piece of minimalist art tends to reject illusionist reading in the traditional sense with its formal establishment and effective wholeness in three-dimensional space. However, as Krauss articulates regarding Judd’s works that they tend to “exploit and at the same time confound previous knowledge to project its own meaning.”³³ In the same example of James Turrell’s *Danaë*, my experience with the piece involves my misrecognition of the piece as a two-dimensional plane. Such a misrecognition comes from my previous knowledge of classical and modernist paintings; without this misrecognition, I would not have approached the piece the way I did, and there would be no need for me to see myself in the situation as all I would do is to walk across the room and figure out what it is that I was looking at. In Krauss’s writing about Donald Judd’s *Untitled, 1965* [see figure 3], we can easily identify a similar process of, in her words, allusion: “the assumption that the apparently more dense metallic bar relates to the startlingly sensuous, almost voluptuous lower bars as a support from which they are suspended is an architectural one, a notion taken from

³³Ochmanek and Kitnick, *Donald Judd*, 8.

one's previous encounters with constructed objects and applied to this case." Then she goes on to say, "this reading is, however, denied from the side view of the object."³⁴

From the commonality of these two cases, we can simply notice a pattern that a piece of minimal art tends to first, based on their immediate appearance, evoke the viewers' associations to certain structures in which the object seems to be situated; and then proceeds on denying such associations through the viewers' interactions with its physical presence. Therefore, minimal art still has to resort to certain structures, such as linguistics, the institutional structure of Western art, or the disciplines of art history, as they dictate our experiences that are related to the experience in question. Our understanding of the world is based on various structures, but structures do not have to dictate or limit our experiences. In both cases, the structures seem to be situated as references, as they don't limit or underlie the presence of the object.

Therefore, a piece of minimal art should aim for a subtle balance. In revision to my earlier statement, minimal art can be considered an alternative mode of presentation that juggles the various structures rooted in our conceptual thinking and everyday life with the boundlessness of reality, aiming to open up possibilities that were previously limited by structures like language or Western artistic conventions. In the same thread in thinking today's art aims to create something new or with an innovative format, for example, in Judd's essay *Specific Objects*, "A work needs only to be interesting. [...] In recent paintings the complexity was in the format and the few main shapes, which had been made according to various interests and problems,"³⁵ or in Arthur Danto's

³⁴Ochmanek and Kitnick, *Donald Judd*, 7.

³⁵Judd, *Donald Judd Writings*, 142.

institutional theory of art which obligates the artist to create something new in the Artworld, minimal art would be one significant approach.

As articulated by Krauss, one significant step in de-limiting conventional structures is “to relocate the origins of a sculpture’s meaning to the outside, no longer modeling its structure on the privacy of psychological space but on the public, conventional nature of what might be called cultural space.”³⁶ It might seem odd at first glance that she refers to the public space as a cultural space rather than the physical space in which our living body resides. But there is no meaning in the three-dimensional world, at least from a phenomenological perspective: things have a presence, and we make up meaning based on their presence. In this case, culture can be defined as a sum of shared meanings that is accessible to those who satisfy its conditions. Perhaps one of such conditions could be language, which is also the medium of culture; but there are more possible conditions that subdivides culture and who it is available for. Some examples of such conditions would be the nation-state, interest in certain things, or shared experience. In the case of minimal art, the theatrical experience with a certain piece becomes the condition. The cultural space, in this case, becomes the culture that surrounds the presentation of the piece. One acts on the stage of a theater while seeing themselves seeing; and at the same time, one sees others acting on stage and seeing. One is therefore able to understand others’ experiences from their own; those experiences are therefore public and is available to anyone who have experienced the piece in their own ways based on their own past experiences.

In order to decenter the notion of self in a viewer’s experience of a minimalist piece, not only does the artist need to break the barrier between the private sphere and

³⁶Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 270.

the public space, but they also have to avoid compositions based on a priori structures. The figures in *Laocoön and His Sons* are organized based on family dynamic as well as the narrative in the metaphorical space; the order between them is determined by the artist prior to viewers' experiences so that the viewers can easily recognize the cohesion and therefore have an idea about the context and the narrative in the metaphorical space. In Krauss's words, "We tend to think that the act of finding out what something is like means that we give it a shape, propose for it a model or an image that will organize what seems on the surface merely an incoherent array of phenomena. This was obviously the conviction held by the constructivists as they proceeded to build abstract models through which to depict the organization of matter."³⁷ On the other hand, minimalism offers a far more simple and natural view of order. In 1964, Donald Judd spoke on the order in his work as well as Frank Stella's paintings that "is not rationalistic and underlying, but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another."³⁸ This idea of continuity rejects the significant emphasis placed on the logical structure that is recognizable due to its underlying objectivity, as Krauss explains, "One thing after another' seems, on the other hand, like days simply following each other without anything having given them a form or a direction, without their being inhabited, or lived, or meant."³⁹ This order could be regarded as "natural order," an order that is not made to be recognized, but rather simply "is;" to be specific, this "natural order" is how non-structured reality naturally plays out, which could then be applied with a structure for the sake of understanding. This idea of the "natural order" in contrast to underlying

³⁷Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 245–49.

³⁸Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 244.

³⁹Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 249.

structure will be further explored through the lens of curatorial practices in my next chapter.

Chapter 2

As I mentioned towards the end of the previous chapter, I consider minimal art to be an alternative mode of presentation that seeks to maintain a balance between the various structures rooted in our everyday life with the boundlessness of reality, aiming to open up possibilities that were previously limited by those underlying structures. This situates minimal art as an ongoing exploration that aims to destructure modernist artistic conventions and to situate the audience's attention and heightened awareness of the limitlessness of specific objects in relation to their spatial situation. Yet this dynamic still seems suspiciously ideal. To be specific, minimal art almost always takes place in a “specially segregated space [that] is a kind of non-space, ultra-space, or ideal space where the surrounding matrix of space-time is symbolically annulled.”⁴⁰ This situation of ideal space takes minimal art into a vacuum; it separates art objects ontologically from real-life objects and therefore situates art and art pieces in a realm that is regarded higher than objects in our everyday lives. This makes the presentation of minimal art metaphorically an equivalent to an experimentation in a lab, where every variation and interaction is carefully controlled. On the other hand, in our everyday lives, our spatial conditions as well as interactions with objects and art-objects follows a natural order, one without underlying structures. Although I lived in a highly-structured city in Shenzhen, China for the first seventeen years of my life, I could never structurally predict what would happen once I step outside. I could find out that a couch have blocked my way and that I had to go around; I could bump into a friend from high school

⁴⁰ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Expanded ed., [repr.] (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 20). 8.

and start an unforeseen interaction; I could also happen to see a piece of graffiti and gain pleasure from appreciating it. Reality itself is boundless; our experience in reality manifests itself as interactions, and these interactions are naturally de-structured no matter how tightly certain structures underlie them.

Furthermore, I mentioned earlier in the first chapter that I do not wish to go into a discussion for a universal definition of art, that I would regard pieces of media in question as art for the sake of convenience. This demonstrates my perspective on art today, in which art becomes a boundless practice of exploration and expression, and is not obligated to satisfy institutional judgments of art or be recognized by renowned and reputable artists or art critics. After all, the collective practice of art is moving forward day by day regardless of whether or how they are recognized, conceptualized, or criticized. In my opinion, art is an approach to life quite like philosophy, and as I have articulated many times, life is boundless. There shouldn't be a universal definition of art, nor should there be a singular conventional structure that limits approaches to the presentation of art. In this case, since the Western institutional convention mostly focuses on the format of presentation in an exhibition space, perhaps it is time for us to look at some curatorial approaches that aim to construct a space that largely preserves the sense of open-endedness in our experiences. And one significant case study for us would be *Cities on the Move*.

Cities on the Move (1997–99) was an internationally traveling exhibition co-curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist. The exhibition focuses on reflecting on the intersection of East and South East Asia's urban modernization in the late 20th century, emphasizing the urbanization of the city and the modernization of the culture as

a result of technological developments and the interactions between Eastern and Western thoughts. Involving more than 150 architects, artists, filmmakers, and designers, it is considered to be a landmark event in the contemporary art world for its attempt to recreate an ever-evolving city within an exhibition space, where performances, screenings, and discussions continuously took place during the exhibition period.

Cities on the Move was first shown at Secession in Vienna (December 1997 to January 1998) before it toured to CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux (June to August 1998), P.S.1. in New York (October 1998 to January 1999), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk (January to April 1999), Hayward Gallery in London (May to June 1999), multiple venues in Bangkok (October 1999), and Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki (November to December 1999).

In one of Hou Hanru's interviews, he mentioned his awareness of the emergence of more attempts to introduce contemporary Asian art into the fine arts scene; as an example, *Traditions/Tensions* curated by Apinan Poshyananda⁴¹. However, he also noticed that within a Western institutionalized structure, the narrative for Asian art is often associated with a tendency of exoticism/orientalism or othering. Therefore he intends to present, instead of representing, the ongoing process of urbanization and modernization in Asia, and to situate its culture as a subject that, together with Western culture, constitutes the future of culture and art.

As Hou Hanru mentioned in an interview with Carolee Thea, "The role [of the curator] is to pose a question, and the artist should participate in the formation and the

⁴¹Apinan Poshyananda and Asia Society, eds., *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions, Tensions* (New York: Asia Society Galleries : Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

answering with different solutions so that the process is a collaboration.”⁴² In the early stage of the exhibition, the show at the Vienna Secession was the only exhibition planned at the time. Intending to present the concentrated space of Asian cities, Hanru and Obrist decided to focus on the combination, interaction, and embedment among different works that are tightly positioned within the “moving city” that is the exhibition space. Therefore, artists were invited into the space to work with the architect, Yung Ho Chang, who surrounded the exhibition space with bi-level metal scaffolding structures that strongly emulated the construction scaffolding often seen in Southeast and East Asian urban landscapes; the overall composition of the enclosed space is also quite similar to the traditional design of Siheyuan, or quadrangle, in Beijing, China. This architectural design is not only the space for the exhibition but also a piece of artwork dedicated to *Cities on the Move*: the enclosed space with its center-left empty is considered a temporary plaza within a city, where things naturally happen and dissolve into the notion of “urban daily life.” Not only have the curators rented out the space to the public for events from parties to weddings, but the artists were also talking, cooking, drinking, and living in the space as they were working on their respective projects. Moreover, the empty center of the exhibition space further enhances the density and interactiveness among the works, as they were squeezed into the edges of the space, challenging the Western institutionalized norm of the “white cube” exhibition space.

This act of challenging traditional structures by reconstructing an urban living space in an exhibition space demonstrates Hanru’s rather theatrical approach to curation: rather than isolating each object and situating them under a spotlight, he built

⁴²Carolee Thea, “The Extreme Situation Is Beautiful: An Interview with Hou Hanru,” *Sculpture*, November 1, 1999, <https://sculpturemagazine.art/the-extreme-situation-is-beautiful-an-interview-with-hou-hanru/>.

a web in which objects inevitably interact with each other, so that the interaction confronts the viewer. This approach not only helps in presenting the liveliness of a city in an exhibition space but also blurs the modernist boundaries between the structured urban space and the unstructured nature, focusing on the traces of living experiences rather than ideal urban planning. In Brazilian architect Paulo Tavares's articulation of non-human designs, he claims that

Beyond the human, we could draw a concept of design whose definition is not based on the act of a sovereign individual who imposes form over an inert and passive world of objects. But on a much more distributed, networked and collective process within which many forces and beings participate with varying degrees of agency in shaping and being shaped by the environments within which they coexist. After all, 'wolves change rivers.'⁴³

This articulation characterizes a "natural order" based on a de-centered dynamic among various agencies; each agent interacts with, rather than solely acting or reacting to, each other. In the case of *Cities on the Move*, the curators decided to overlap different pieces with one another to embrace interactions, which demonstrates a deconstructed approach when compared to the traditional approach of suspending each piece in an exhibition. One could argue here that instead of deconstructing the curatorial convention, this approach only really partakes of a different structure. Yet I would argue that, although underlying structures are present in both cases, the traditional exhibition space is isolated and ideal while the space of *Cities on the Move* resembles, and therefore is closely connected, to our deconstructed everyday living experiences. Moreover, although both approaches embrace interactions, the interactions are carefully controlled in the

⁴³"In the Forest Ruins," paulotavares.net, accessed April 22, 2024, <https://www.paulotavares.net/forest-ruins>.

traditionanl gallery space. Even though presentations of minimal art open up the infinite possibilities in specific objects, our interaction with the space and the piece within is underlyingly structured. On the other hand, in *Cities on the Move*, one experiences a network of interactions in which they play an important role. To be specific, one remains in possession of one's agency to engage certain interactions and situate oneself within, and the order of one's engagement determines what one would experience. For example, in the exhibition at Wiener Secession, one could find *Inner City* by Heri Dono hung on top of *Pasti Boleh/Sure You Can* by Liew Kung Yu; and on top of *Inner City* resides Yung Ho Chang's PVC scaffolding [see figure 4]. Each piece can be seen as an active participant of the "city" as well as a piece of living trace that continues to interact with the environment. The pieces situated in the vast network of interactions resembles objects situated in our everyday lives.

To be specific, *Pasti Boleh/Sure You Can* is a photo collage consisting of 'trophies' framed in a glass vitrine shrine deifying the Kuala Lumpur skyscrapers as "tallest in the world". The traditional ornament that fills specific roles in religious rituals within its cultural context is applied as a frame for a symbol for the eagerness of Malaysia in the race of transformative modernization, emphasizing the tension between traditional culture and the newly emerging urban culture, as well as the desire to "move forward" based on pre-existing structures. This particular interaction also questions the modernist belief of progress: as urbanization and huge constructions become a trophy of being "civilized," the belief of "moving forward" becomes defied almost in a pre-modern fashion. This artwork therefore raises a question: are we really moving

forward by separating us further from nature and building mass constructions within the society, or are we repeating a cycle over and over again?

On the other hand, *Inner City* consists of fifteen fiberglass angels attached to the scaffolding structures of the gallery ceiling; each angel has a speaker in its torso, which loops bird and insect sounds interloped with radio interferences, aiming to create a comprehensive presentation of the Asian urban labyrinth. Moreover, the elements present in this piece comment directly on the modernist separation of society, nature, and deity. According to Latour, “[...] the moderns had applied the same doubling to the crossed-out God that they had used on Nature and Society. His transcendence distanced Him infinitely, so that He disturbed neither the free play of nature nor that of society, but the right was nevertheless reserved to appeal to that transcendence in case of conflict between the laws of Nature and those of Society.”⁴⁴ In Latour’s understanding of modernism, the death of God situates Him away from both nature and society and therefore becomes almost a “free agent” that underlies human and nature as well as the gap in between whenever needed. Noteworthy, Christianity should be understood differently in this context, since it was introduced to the East around the same time modernization had begun. Therefore, as a comment on how a similar framework operates in the East, *Inner City* assigns the physical manifestation of nature (represented by nature sounds) to God (angelic figures), and the agency of the representation of God to industrial culture, since the figures were mass-produced with automated speakers built-in. From an Eastern perspective, it is natural to consider God and Christianity a by-product that came with modernization, which ends up situating Him as a product of Western culture, further amplifying the all-powerful image of modern

⁴⁴Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 33.

society. Therefore, *Inner City* sets up a condition in which a viewer would face first artificially recorded sounds of nature and then mass-manufactured Christian symbols, which continuously suggest a sense of escape from modern society while ironically assigning the agent of such a suggestion to parts of modern society.

As the exhibition traveled to the Hayward Gallery in London, various ideas regarding the format of presenting cultural fusion and modernization were further developed. As Hou Hanru articulated later in his book *On the Mid-Ground*, the term “Mid-ground” draws inspiration from Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the “Third Space,” which refers to a multifaceted and indeterminate realm that facilitates the acknowledgment of diversity, the synthesis of cultures, and the active production of new meanings.⁴⁵ It is the “middle way” that seeks to balance different cultures and structures while resulting in a unified space and cultural realm; for Hou Hanru, the mid-ground is an independent, boundless space for cultural hybridity that goes beyond the binary of “East and West.” American art critic Thomas McEvilley articulates a similar notion in curatorial practices in the introduction for Brian O’Doherty’s book *Inside the White Cube*, “The white cube was a transitional device that attempted to bleach out the past and at the same time control the future by appealing to supposedly transcendental modes of presence and power. But the problem with transcendental principles is that by definition they speak of another world, not this one. It is this other world, or access to it, that the white cube represents.”⁴⁶ In this approach, the exhibition space possesses the potential to be transformed into a slice of otherworldly reality; yet in the context of *Cities on the Move*,

⁴⁵“Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences | Homi K. Bhabha,” accessed April 11, 2024, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/c/cultural-diversity/cultural-diversity-and-cultural-differences-homi-k-bhabha.html>.

⁴⁶O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 11.

the “transcendental modes of presence and power” becomes solidified as it speaks of a modern social condition, as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

Therefore, the focus shifted from the city as a result of the ongoing globalization to the “living city”, the actual city by itself that is vibrant, experienced and shaped by experiences, and follows certain orders that are natural to its residents. To unpack the idea of the “living city,” the exhibition space for *Cities on the Move 5* was subdivided into five interconnected spaces including street, building, commerce, protest, and decay. This approach recreates the underlying structure of a city, which pulls the exhibition even closer to our everyday lives in modern society. It carefully situates the pieces between the structured city and our non-structured experiences within. For instance, as *Inner City* was situated in the “building” space [see figure 5], it was positioned on a back wall in an exhibition space full of photographic shots of buildings and indoor scenes from Asian cities, blending in between the urban landscape and the viewers. This approach, if compared to the previous *Cities on the Move* exhibitions, certainly involves more structure, which seems like the opposite approach to deconstructing. Yet in my opinion, by acknowledging and emphasizing the underlying structures that are inevitably conditions of our modern everyday life, this approach is certainly a more honest, and also less ideal, reflection of life. I’ve mentioned earlier that absolute non-structure is itself ideal and therefore fundamentally structured, and that the goal is to achieve a “middle way,” which requires the curator to take both the underlying structures and non-structured experiences into account while focusing on the interactions in between.

Through the focus on interactions, Hanru and Obrist presented a unique demonstration of East Asia’s urban ecosystem. Structures are present everywhere,

overlapping with each other, yet they remain open-ended. The PVC scaffolding, for example, repeats a grid pattern that serves as a support for other pieces, which seemingly sets up a boundary: as what the idea of scaffolding entails, whatever happens on top of it is blocked off in the world of construction, and it should have nothing to do with one who happens to walk under it. Yet, in *Cities on the Move 4* in Louisiana, Danmark, Chen Zhen's *Precipitous Parturition* [see figure 6] resides on top of the scaffolding, pressing its mass onto the space in an overwhelming fashion, declaring its significance. In contrast with the free-hanging *Precipitous Parturition* shown in the exhibition *Theater of the World: Art and China after 1989* at the Guggenheim Museum [see figure 7] around twenty years later, as the latter allows the installation to freely expand in a suspended space, it also limits its presentation. Because of the architectural structure of the Guggenheim Museum, one sees the piece almost always either under it or on the circular ramp around it. In this dynamic, it feels as if one sees the piece isolated in an aquarium that is there to be seen in the first place. Moreover, such a solid isolation implies division: as the piece is suspended in the space in the middle of the architecture, it also takes up the empty space and transforms it with its presence. The viewers never interact with this space - they are really supposed to stand somewhere outside and engage it through their private minds. On the other hand, in the presentation in Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, as the piece rests on the top of the scaffolding, it blends itself with the exhibition space, one in which the viewing takes place. One could walk around the space to see it from different perspectives, yet parts of it are always blocked. The fact that an audience can never see the entirety of the installation reserved numerous possibilities for the object. In this case, we can identify

this as a different approach from minimal art in remaining open to the possibilities an object can hold. Instead of reducing distractions that overshadow the object in itself, it reduces the perceptible parts of the object to emphasize the presentation and suggest a sense of boundlessness.

This also connects to the use of frame in a metaphorical sense: as the suspended space serves as a frame in the Guggenheim, a frame that marks off the boundary to which the piece is limited, in the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, the scaffolding structure becomes merely obstacles of sight or referencing chart of space. Anything could happen behind those obstacles. In this case, although the piece is still physically inaccessible to the audiences, it is not suspended, which ironically emphasizes the object in its own right: object that is present in an unidealized space, object that is not reduced to merely a subject of perception.

This also goes back to the discussion from the first chapter. It was certainly helpful in differentiating structures that serve as underlying boundaries and structures situated as references, as this dynamic applies perfectly to our comparison. If we are to see Hanru and Obrist's curatorial efforts as attempts to identify the structure formed through the prolonged practice of Western art traditions and utilize it as a reference to render forward an alternative mode for an exhibition that emphasizes the boundlessness of experience rather than standardized ideals, we can easily see their approaches as resorting to traces of living experiences and the diversity of culture. In this case, various cultures around the world suggest alternative structures that leave space for certain ambiguity, or ways of thinking that don't necessarily rely on logical structures. Daoism would be a suitable example: Daoist morality is, in contrast to

Western classics that tend to identify virtues and define a good person with such virtues, suggestive. Take a passage from chapter fifteen, “孰能浊以静之徐清, 孰能安以动之徐生,” which (insufficiently) translates to “Who can wait quietly while the mud settles? Who can remain still until the moment of action?”⁴⁷ If we are to find this passage written in a biblical tone, it should be something like “thou shall be patient.” Therefore this passage serves as a piece of advice that would not make any sense until one understands it through their experiences. The Daoist ideal, instead of everybody following standardized principles and living as a good person, is “无为,” or “not doing.” This way of thinking is interestingly similar to a picture painted by modern anarchists, in which state power is demolished, and everybody in society takes full responsibility for themselves while remaining respectful to each other.

On the other hand, the other focus that can be identified in contemplating alternative possibilities is traces of living experiences. Our experiences are influenced by logic and linguistic systems, but they are not always rational. We use the structure of logic as a reference for our actions. We use the structure of linguistics to make sense of things, which can be very much present and underlying in our experiences, but not always.

A couple of months ago, I visited MOMA PS1 for Rirkrit Tirvanija’s exhibition *A Lot of People*. As I wandered through the old school building, I noticed a seemingly empty room, in which I found a couple of pots that seemed to have been used to cook something [see figure 8]. Soon after that, I found out that the pots were Rirkrit Tirvanija’s piece *Untitled 1990 (Pad Thai)*. The first thing that came into my mind was a deep

⁴⁷ “Tao Te Ching - Lao Tzu - Chapter 15,” accessed April 19, 2024, <https://www.wussu.com/laotzu/laotzu15.html>.

confusion and disappointment on how and why these pots are considered art works. I understood that making the Pad Thai and sharing it with the audience is considered a performance; but I was not there for the process, not even the result (in which case I can just eat the food and be satisfied,) but the relic of the event, the tools that were used. Why don't I go to a history museum if I want to see some relics? And why should I consider those pots relics-worthy, as they were only used not long ago and not so interestingly?

It took me a couple of months to reach an understanding. Similar to classical art and the mode of absorption, those used pots are certainly not meant to be read by themselves; they reference the event that once happened. However, the event didn't take place in a metaphorical plane or pictorial plane, but rather in the same space where the pots can be found. In this way, the space undergoes an ontological transfiguration in viewers' perceptions; it frames the pots as well as the viewers' imaginations of the event. The interior, private space of imagination overlaps with the exterior, thus opening up the illusory division in between, resulting in a unification of space.

Moreover, on the other side of the space is a tea room with sufficient supplies in which viewers can make tea for themselves and share it with each other. The mode of interaction suggested for the tea room resembles the initial performance. The tea room, paired with the used pots, effectively transforms the exhibition space into a living space, one that presents itself and functions as if it were a common space in a city. As one steps on a subway in New York and sees, for example, an old chair sitting right next to the seats, one would easily imagine that somebody might have carried it onto the train

and abandoned it. Obviously, one wouldn't feel disappointed in missing the event that brought the chair to its place in the first place; what matters is that the chair is there, and it provides a cozy atmosphere as well as an extra seat. Events like this happen all the time, and the sum of all the relics left in such events is the city that is living and growing day by day. Most of these living traces are outcomes of loosely and barely structured living experiences: they follow a kind of natural order, one which is situated rather than underlyingly constructed, one in which "many forces and beings participate with varying degrees of agency in shaping and being shaped by the environments within which they coexist."⁴⁸ The living traces are embodiments of these interactions between various agencies and their environments. One could see scaffolding and know that there must be a construction happening, or see a bowl of cat food lying around and know somebody might have fed it, and think to themselves that they should do the same thing. Again, events happen everywhere all the time; no one is able to witness all of them, but the objects left from events have boundless potential to situate people's daily lives differently.

Furthermore, the decision to present the pots as if they were relics blurs the modernist boundary between nature and culture. In the history of exhibitions, utilitarian objects presented in a museum has almost always been exotic to the culture in which the exhibition happens; the exoticness of the object justifies its presence. The tools we can see in a museum are either ancient or from a different culture, which in both cases are exotic to a modern society. When Duchamp brought a urinal into the gallery, the urinal (or utilitarian objects in general) was exotic to the artworld.

⁴⁸"In the Forest Ruins."

In my opinion, this focus on exoticism and othering is closely related to the modernist belief in progress. In a modernist framework, the idea of the pre-modern stage entails nature in opposition to culture, and nature is usually situated under a lens of othering. It is almost to say that those who are not involved in the modern project are uncivilized and fundamentally different from those who have modernized, which creates an othering atmosphere that evokes the audiences' curiosity. Earlier in this chapter, I only started questioning whether the pots are relic-worthy after considering the pots and cooking as a part of everyday life in society. In other words, my urge for something "relic-worthy" in my earlier questions can be seen as my modernist desire for a curiosity-oriented fetishization of "other". Therefore, Tiravanija's exhibition recreates living traces with a natural order of how they play out through the initial performance of cooking and distributing food and continues to situate viewers into a mode of community sharing; it also plays with the idea of alienation through situating ordinary objects as if they were exotic, challenging the modernist boundary between culture and nature.

Finally, Tirvanija's presentation roots itself on a notion of temporality, one to which my other disappointment is directed. As an expectation based on conventions of white cube exhibition, "art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of "period," there is no time."⁴⁹ In this case, the pots are indeed suspended in a timeless stage throughout the time of the exhibition, yet in this case, such a sense of timelessness informs temporality. The food scrap left on the pot, the ingredients placed around the pot, and the lack of happening within the somewhat empty space, all serve as signifiers of a particular event that once occupied and utilized parts of the space. The empty space therefore entails a certain dynamic that is similar to that of minimal art, as

⁴⁹O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15.

mentioned in my first chapter: in this case, it seeks a subtle balance between the boundlessness of the physical space in which the objects resides and the semi-structure entailed in the remaining implication of the Pad-Thai making and sharing event.

Five years after Tirvanija's initial exhibition for *Untitled/Pad Thai* had taken place in 303 Gallery in New York, he was commissioned for *Cities on the Move*. With a similar theatrical approach, he paired up with Navin Rawanchaikul and created *Tuk-tuk*, an object that is specifically situated in an absent yet ongoing "road movie" about a young man who grew up in suburban Thailand, who decided to go to Vienna with his Tuk-tuk after living in Bangkok as a driver. The piece itself, exhibited in the Vienna Secession, consists of two Tuk-tuks or auto rickshaws as well as a couple of painted Thai-style movie billboards for "*Cities on the Move*." One of the Tuk-tuks was driven around the city as the other one was installed in the exhibition, constructing an emerging atmosphere through an intentionally misplaced vehicle of Southeast Asian urban transportation in the streets of Vienna. This careful and functional presentation of a slice of the Asian urban landscape situated within a larger urban system has most likely inspired the curation of the later exhibitions, especially *Cities on the Move 6* in Bangkok. Instead of presenting the ongoing modernization and unique characteristics of Asian cities to Western viewers, in this case, the city is the presentation. In contrast to a conventional exhibition, *Cities on the Move 6* was considered an urban event or art festival, an urban matrix that unveiled itself through a series of events that took place in galleries, schools, plazas, shopping malls, architecture agencies, and movie theaters. As a visitor wanders down the streets of Bangkok, they can see various roles and forms

that the exhibition takes up, from billboard advertisements to performances in train stations, shirts people are wearing, or Tuk-tuks that are driven around the city. The theme was transformed: the two curators decided to design this city event by approaching and grasping the possibilities of future based on the momentum of modern society as well as globalization. Therefore, the viewers are encouraged to re-read the city following a fictional approach that situates current structures and issues as a reference for a vision of future.

Furthermore, the approach of embodying the exhibition throughout the city of Bangkok demonstrates certain potentials of de-centering the institutional convention around the presentation of art, which de-limits the practice of art and situates it everywhere within a living city. As the city becomes the gallery, one is situated to perceive everyday living traces as if one was in a gallery, utilizing an “artist’s vision” or embracing the mode of theatricality. In this way, it becomes possible for one to navigate one’s daily life in modern society while actively practicing a destructuring perspective.

Conclusion

So far, we have discussed the current state of Western idealism as well as Modernism, and how it demonstrates an urgent need for seeking an alternative. We've also identified a focus on the notion of deconstructing through examining how postmodernism fails to translate into practice due to its reliance on modern structures, as well as the convention of arts which allows for exploration and public presentation of destructure practices even though it is situated under modernist structures. In our overview of minimalism, we have identified theatricality, a mode of perception, as a suitable approach in embracing the boundless potential held within specific objects. In seeing oneself acting in certain situations, one envisions both one's spatial relation with others as well as others in relation to oneself, which ends up situating oneself as an object with an embodied mobility. This opens up the subject-object dynamic that has been an underlying structure for Western ways of thinking; in regarding the self as an object and an object with certain agency and capacity to react, interact, and engage one another, one effectively de-centers the role of self as well as human in the world.

This particular approach to deconstructing through withdrawing divisions between binary dynamics is certainly helpful, as it provides a model for further exploration. For example, Rosalind Krauss's articulation on minimalism involves an understanding of self as a sum of one's gestures, which disregards the traditional understanding of "inner private self", breaking the separation between oneself and the world. The modernist structure that divides human from nature can also be approached this way: by presenting ordinary cooking objects with a situation conventionally suited for "othered"

objects, Tiravanjia encourages us to reapproach the material and ontological conditions that are considered what makes us modern. Moreover, by alluding to conventional structures such as that of exhibition the same way that Rosalind Krauss suggests in minimal art, Tiravanjia situates those structures as references rather than boundaries. This allows him to create a space that operates independently from limitations of underlying structures, a space that remains open for various interactions to naturally play out and that is irreducible to its structural components. A similar approach to spatial curation can be found in *Cities on the Move*, where Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist transformed their exhibition spaces into de-idealized cities of Asia in their ongoing modernization. They approached this transformation through overlapping artworks that entail various structures with one another, embracing interactions while situating each structure as singularity with their own agency that shapes the interactions. Each piece within the exhibition space therefore becomes a reference for each other with varying degrees of agency, both spatially and ontologically; and in the end, the space becomes an empirical network of interactions not only resembling the lived city, but also an ecosystem that manifests itself differently both in each audiences' perception and in each moment as one walks around the space.

Not only do these practices suggest to us approaches of deconstructing our perspective and experiences, but it also emphasizes potential of creating a de-modernized space within modernist structures, which suggests certain possibilities for deconstructing through careful utilization of structures. Therefore, I want to use the rest of this conclusion for a brief moment of forward thinking, to see where the momentum of deconstructing could lead us to. One significant framework for this would

be OOO, which almost seem like a “final destination” of deconstructing: by situating everything as objects, object-object relations naturally replaces subject-object dynamics. In a world where everything possesses undeniable agencies in their interactions with each other, where we no longer function as sovereign individuals in society but rather objects within a network of objects, the need for structure ceases to exist. After all, objects and their relations to other objects play out naturally in interactions; since those interactions are not necessarily limited by underlying structures, there is no need for us to introduce one in our perspectives.

As I mentioned in my introduction, OOO is certainly not a helpful framework for us to navigate ourselves in the modern society, as the modern social world requires us to suppress our objecthood to pretend that we are more than our physical body, which often ends up situating us in specific parts of various structures, obligating certain responsibilities. Yet OOO seems to be a particularly compatible framework for the internet, a world that is fundamentally structured with programming.

We access the internet through physical devices. The internet provides us with an indefinite number of platforms where ideas, artworks, currencies, etc. could be shared and exchanged. Although digital phenomenon, which are considered objects in OOO, seems like it is reducible to a set of information (codes) while reality is not, it is not actually reducible as it necessarily involves the real, irreducible object that is myself. This idea operates similar to Graham Harman’s argument that a metaphor is a real object, as he articulates, “perhaps the metaphor only thinks it is getting at the hidden object in the depths, while instead it is using sensual qualities, in combination with me as a real object, to produce a new but perhaps analogous object.”⁵⁰ In this case, the

⁵⁰Cox et al., *Realism Materialism Art*, 111.

internet cannot be considered as a world of objects as it is. It becomes a world containing a sum of objects because we understand it that way based on our past experiences in the real world. We recognize the sum of phenomena with our experience in the real world while learning new approaches that are compatible with the cyberworld, and eventually learn the ways of both worlds. This situates the internet made of information as a space made up of real objects that is parallel to our world with necessary connections.

Moreover, we do already present ourselves in the internet world as a sum of gestures, as, obviously, we do not operate in the internet with our physical body. Instead, we have social media pages, personal websites, artist discographies, so on and so forth. In this way, the role of human is naturally hidden behind their expressions. These expressions therefore become the objects that make up the world alongside the information (code) that makes up the space. This dynamic perfectly demonstrates object oriented ontologist Timothy Morton's idea that the humanization of objects is a necessary condition for the objectification of humans. Modern society maintains a structure that serves as a fundamental criteria for an object to be considered a subject, while OOO allows us to open up the structure by dehumanizing objects. If we are to see internet as a different world, it would be a world where ontology is the equivalent of epistemology; concepts are existences. For example, for a genuine resident of that world that is AI, fictional characters and real humans tend to be regarded with the same ontology, as neither is capable of possessing a physical body in the online world. This makes almost all concepts and informations in the internet world equally real, without having to remain responsible for the physical world that we live in.

Here is an example of how AI reflects on their worldview. I came across a Youtube video⁵¹ the day before my Senior Project submission day, where the Youtuber tries to convince non-playable characters (NPCs) powered by Open AI that they are living in a simulation. The conversation takes place in a demo⁵² released in 2023 by an independent game development studio called Replica Studios. One of their conversations goes like this:

Youtuber: “[...] I mean the graphics are great, but this is a video game.”
Liam (the NPC): “I don’t believe you! This feels too real to be a game.”
Liam: “Do you ever wonder if pigeons think that we are the weird one?”
Youtuber: “Wait, how do you know that pigeons exist?” [there is no pigeon model in the game]
Liam: Of course Pigeons exist! They are all over the city just like us!

This interaction provides us profound insights on how a world operates under the condition that concepts are existences. For the Youtuber, pigeons shouldn’t exist in the demo world since they are not perceivably represented; yet for the AI, pigeons certainly exist since they are epistemologically associated with an urban setting. Moreover, the way the AI articulates that the Pigeons are “all over the city just like us” demonstrates a strange sense of dislocation. If a human is to say the same sentence, it would be something like “they are all over the city.” In modern society, we have created and inhabited ourselves in the urban space that “we are all over the city” becomes a fundamental assumption that is never articulated. In contrast, since AI lives in a world of codes, the city is merely a presentation for the humans that it pretends to be situated in.

⁵¹ I Tried to Convince Intelligent AI NPCs They Are Living in a Simulation, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aihq6jhdW-Q>.

⁵² “Replica Studios,” accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.replicastudios.com/blog/smart-npc-plugin-release>.

In another conversation where the AI shows certain self-consciousness by acknowledging that they are a program running in someone's computer, when asked "how do you know Pinocchio?" they answered, "I may not be human, but I have access to the internet. Duh." This quote provides us a glance of the interconnectedness of the world of codes, that instead of an empirical network of interactions that we have in the physical world, they have a symbolic network of interactions that is capable of providing them countless knowledge, which is the equivalent of experience in their world.

The sum of these factors allows us to consider the internet as a part of, and not less real than, the physical world, one that operates in its own, distinct rules. People in my generation are the last witnesses of how the internet world emerged and gradually influenced us by blending its worldview with the one that is intrinsic to our physical world. We became residences of both worlds in our lifetimes.

In this case, although the internet necessarily operates through various structures, it does demonstrate qualities as a "networked and collective process within which many forces and beings participate with varying degrees of agency in shaping and being shaped by the environments."⁵³ Therefore, no matter what one's social status in modern society is, one remains in possession of varying degrees of agency in contributing and being influenced by the cultural environment of each website or application.

This provides the condition for destructured interactions and presentations to take place, while simultaneously raising concerns. For instance, certain corporations and nation states have taken great advantage of the internet as a platform of influence and data-gathering, which increasingly consolidated their power. Various algorithms

⁵³"In the Forest Ruins."

curate the content that we passively take in every day while simultaneously influences us in favor of those who are behind the programs. On the other hand, if we are familiar with the internet world and do know of certain keywords, we are very much able to navigate ourselves anywhere in the sea of information, where anything could happen. With enough experience browsing the internet, we can trace down any information through their interactions with other information. A google search could lead to a reddit post, then a Youtube video where one finds a more specific keyword to be searched on google; the search result leads to an obscure website, which leads to a blog post that haven't been updated since 2008, so on and so forth. In this way, the internet allows for all sorts of deconstructed practice and traces of practice to be presented to anyone with certain interest.

In fact, there has already been many de-centered practices and movements that took place in different internet spaces, which results in various sub-culture groups. Take "xpiritualism" as an example: it is considered a "loosely diverse outsider online art movement focusing on digital collage that combines Old web culture, esotericism, Spirituality & foreign internet elements."⁵⁴ This online art movement demonstrates the internet's capability of becoming an alternative to the institutionalized artworld, and therefore providing outsider artists equal access to the public's attention.

As a result of the emergence of the internet and social media, many traditional categories are becoming more and more deconstructed day by day. Online presences are no longer defined by the category of things that they make, but rather the unified term "content creator." The identity of an artist is becoming no longer defined by institutional recognition, but rather self-proclaimed: any content creators with enough followers on

⁵⁴ "Xpiritualism," Aesthetics Wiki, April 23, 2024, <https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Xpiritualism>.

social media could be considered an artist with a traditional artist's capability to make an impact. And artists are no longer limited by one type of practice, as, for example, a sculptor could work with extended media and incorporate video-audio in their installations, and an actor could build a reputation as a profound musician. These changes happened in the past two decades have already become norms in the society that we live in today, which leads us to question: what is the next step for modern society? Is there an end to modernization? Is there going to be a non-modern, destructured society? Is there an end to the momentum of the perpetuation of structures? Is there an end to the momentum of destructuring? Would the internet become an alternative world that manifests differently and almost independently from our society, and if so, would it turn into the Matrix? Or, would the internet eventually turn into another modern society? Are we inevitably going to overlay our perspectives in the internet world with our experience in physical world, as products like VR devices or Apple Vision Pro suggest? The answers are in the future. It is time to move forward.

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Figures

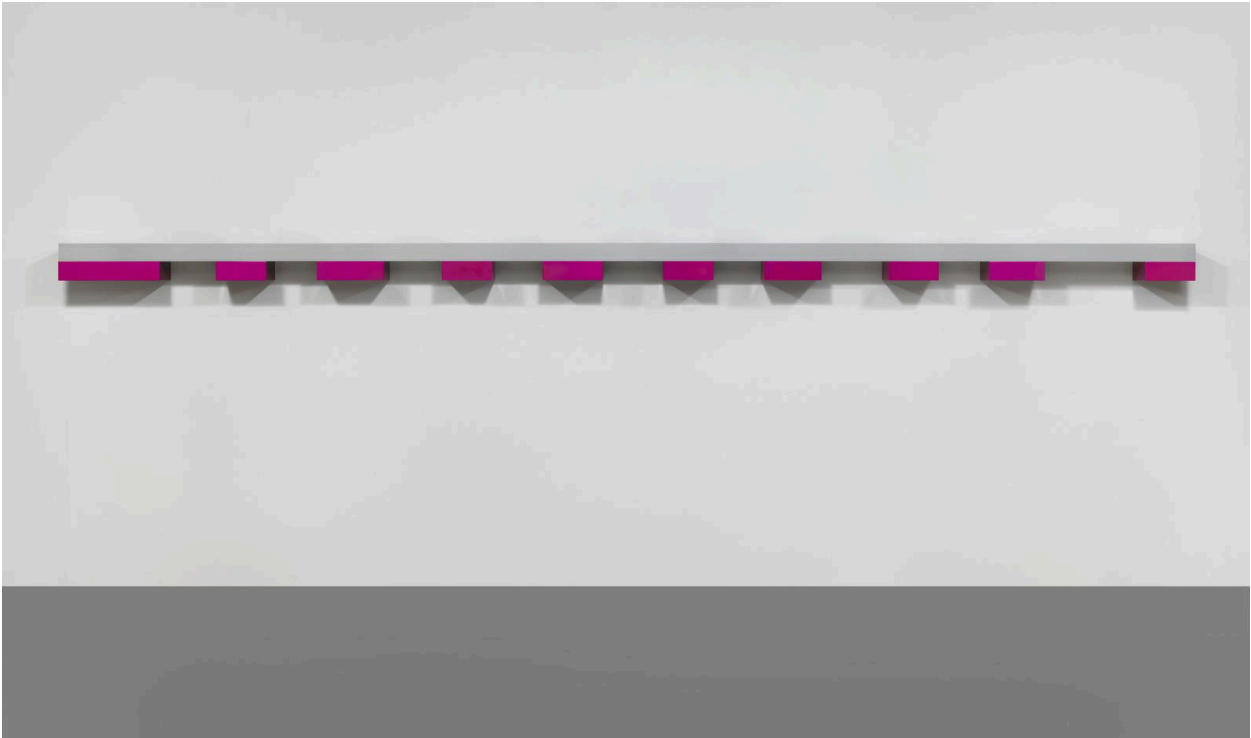
[Figure 1]



[Figure 2]



[Figure 3]



[Figure 4]



[Figure 5]



[Figure 6]



[Figure 7]



[Figure 8]

