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Regarding the Art, the Artist, and the Audience.



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Alienation, Communication Theory, Consumerist Society, Art Experience, Agency of the Artist, Myth of the Artist, Site Specific Art, Art History.

Declaration of Authenticity:

I, Julien Hamilton, declare that to the best of my knowledge, this paper is my own work. This paper has not been submitted for any degree or other purpose. I certify that the intellectual content of this paper is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis as well as sources have been acknowledged.

Julien Hamilton, The Hague, Spring 2024

Abstract:

In the landscape of modern society, alienation is a common denominator to the experience of individuals. Whether this is due to society’s perpetual acceleration, or the experience of life through the ever-present lens of consumerism, alienation is an unmissable part of the contemporary human experience.

This extends to the artworld, where the chasm separating an ever-booming global market for the arts, and institutions struggling to get their pre-covid-19 visitor numbers highlight the disparities in the experience of art today.

These disparities will ultimately transpire in the experience of the viewer. But how, and why can art be a catalyst for alienation in late-contemporary society?

This Graduation Research Paper is an attempt at exploring the relationship between the artwork, the audience, and the artist, so as to attempt and provide a comprehensive notion of the ways in which relationships form around artworks, notably through communication theory. This GRP will also explore examples of elements of influence in the formation of communicative structures between the art and the audience. Notably, this paper will discuss the myth of the artist, and its influence as an authority in the experience of art, as well as the influence of spatial context on the reception of art.

The paper will conclude that the artist possesses limited agency in the reception of their artworks, and that in order to provide an honest experience to a contemporary audience, the artist must seek to understand and deconstruct the codes which the audience is accustomed to.

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And this is ok. Art is a carrot on a stick that we are both dangling from one hand and trying to catch with the other.



Four years ago, when applying to art schools across France, I read a book that was a required reading for one of the entrance exams. This book, *Acceleration and Alienation* by Hartmut Rosa¹, greatly impacted my view of contemporary society. I was (and still am) convinced that alienation was an almost ever-present phenomenon in most social problems.

This interest in the topic of alienation continued passively. I would occasionally find new ways to apply alienation either as a cause or result in the dynamics of another subject, but I would not dedicate particular efforts towards deepening my personal understanding of alienation, especially not in relation to the arts.

However, this changed when I had the chance to show works of mine in the spring of last year. During this exhibition organized in the context of my studies, I had the experience of interacting with audience members who were alienated from my work.

Following this was a rather performative effort to give criticism, a moment that could only have happened due to the behavioral requirements of the academic context.

This experience marked me deeply and led me to reconsider my position in the context of the art academy as a student, and as an artist. This culminated in my choice for a thesis topic: I wanted to explore alienation in the arts, especially how it affected the audience and the artist.

My thoughts went something like this:

There are many kinds of artists in the world, and because of this, being an artist means a multitude of things to yourself and to others. This multi-ply nature is what extends the richness of arts to more than just painting, or sculpture. Today, there is the guarantee that for any member of an audience, there will be art that is ready to speak to them, somehow, somewhere.

The scale of the multiplicity of the arts is forever bigger than our capacity to document it. We will always find new intersections, trace new influences, and unearth new relics. Every time we do so, we will only inch ourselves closer to a true and absolute understanding of the arts, while the unraveling of the present runs away from us.

The scale of this multiplicity leads us to the need to categorize our rich history, to make it digestible. However, the formation of a history reduced to movements and isms, summarized by relatively few artworks, and headed by few artists often of restricted identities (all the while, there is no clear recognition of such a reduction) will ultimately lead to a canon. The canon is a perception of our past which shapes the perception of our present. By submitting to the categorical and hierarchical nature of the canon, we seek to replicate such dynamics in our present-day relationship with art.

This, I believe, is what led to the unpleasant interaction: individuals alienated by the works in front of them but, due to the behavioral expectations of the art academy, must proactively respond to these works. As a result, they direct criticism towards the works, but not without perpetuating a hierarchal, canonical view of art, to validate their criticism and discomfort in the face of something they could not connect with.

Therefore, I gathered that alienation is a dynamic that is present in the experience of artworks, while also acknowledging that there is a general lack of understanding as to how the alienated experience comes to be.

However, as I continued my research and writing, I quickly realized that alienation is but an element of a much bigger puzzle.

This thesis is a comprehensive attempt to map out the “discoveries” of my exploration of the topics I encountered in my research. It will chronologically follow my ideas and thoughts as I developed them in my research and will contain moments of commentary such as this one, which hopefully will help make this text more digestible and fun to read.

¹ Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, 2010, https://openlibrary.org/books/OL24822341M/Alienation_and_acceleration.

This text will hopefully bring something to you, either in its content or in your reaction to it. I will always be excited to hear what you are thinking of.



Part 1: Defining and Remembering the Mechanisms of Estrangement and Alienation.

Alienation, noun, alien·ation, [ā]-[lē]-[ə]-[‘nā-shən]

1 : a withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment: estrangement.²

Alienation as a concept was first established by Karl Marx in the context of his criticism of worker conditions in the industrial setting³. His dissection of alienation leads him to four main vectors by which the worker experiences alienation: alienation from the product, from the production process, from other workers, and consequently, from the self. Marx's proposal for what alienation is fluctuated throughout his writings. As noted by Ernest Mandel⁴, in Marx's later texts, he no longer talks of alienation from the self, but instead he focuses on the other three notions (product, process, worker). Following Marx's ideas on alienation, thinkers who have studied his work debated the central importance of alienation in his thinking, as explained by Reveley⁵.

In time, a divergence appeared in the topical approach to alienation. According to Musto⁶, thinkers such as Fromm and Marcuse discuss alienation of an existential nature, either from the self, or from others. However, Musto criticizes such an approach to the topic of alienation, saying it fails to give importance to 'objective alienation (that of the worker in the labour process and in relation to the labour product)'. This 'objective alienation' is formed around tangible economic realities and is a constant within the capitalist system. For this reason, Musto argues that to approach the topic of alienation while not acknowledging its roots in capitalism is a failure. As such, Musto proposes that a balanced approach of both the subjective and the objective is required to successfully discuss alienation.

One must note that there is a lasting impact from thinkers expanding on the existential qualities of alienation. Today, when one talks of alienation in art, or in most sociological contexts, it is often interpreted as a "maladjustment to social norms", as suggested by Musto.

More recently, it is thinkers like Hartmut Rosa that have reformulated Marx's definition of alienation, making it more accessible in the context of late-contemporary society. Rosa's book *Acceleration and Alienation: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*⁷ frames alienation within our late-stage capitalist society. His main thesis is that society's acceleration is a contributing factor to the increasing sense of alienation experienced by individuals. Acceleration, as Rosa defines it, lies in technological advancements and social needs for such advancements, as driven by capitalism. This leads to an exponential growth in the consequences for society of such advancements. All the while, Rosa also remains close to Marx's early ideas of alienation, showing through multiple lenses the impact of social acceleration on the workplace, and its responsibility in creating what I would call late-stage capitalist working conditions.

One of Rosa's most relatable examples of acceleration is his exploration of mass communication technologies:

"Just think about the consequences of introducing email technology on our time budget. It is fair to assume that writing an email is twice as fast as writing a traditional letter. Now, consider that in 1990, you wrote and received an average of ten letters per working day, and it took you two hours to process them. With the introduction of the new technology, you now only need one hour for your daily correspondence, assuming the number of messages sent and received remains the same. So, you have gained an hour of free time that you can use for something else. Is that what happened? I bet not. In fact, if the number of messages you read and send has doubled, then you still need the same amount of time to deal with your daily correspondence. But I suspect that today you read and write forty, fifty, or even seventy messages a day. So, you need much more time for everything related to communication than you did before the web was invented."⁸

The implications shown in this example expand much further than just communication. As things get faster, we saturate our lives with more tasks, more travel, more knowledge, more conversations and interactions, only for us to be overburdened and eventually alienated if life in society outpaces our capacity to participate in it. Rosa divides this acceleration into three categories affecting space, social relations, and the material world, all of which can be alienating to the individual.

2 Meriam-Webster.com, 2023

3 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844", translated by Martin Milligan, Progress Publishers, 1959

4 Ernest Mandel, "The Formation of the Economic Thought Of Karl Marx, 1943 to Capital", W.W. Norton, 1971

5 James Reveley, "Understanding Social Media Use as Alienation: A Review and Critique," *E-Learning and Digital Media* 10, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 83–94, <https://doi.org/10.2304/elea.2013.10.1.83>.

6 Marcello Musto, "Revisiting Marx's Concept of Alienation," *Socialism and Democracy* 24, no. 3 (November 1, 2010): 79–101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2010.544075>.

7 Rosa, *Acceleration and Alienation: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*.

8 Rosa, *Acceleration and Alienation: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*. p.30

In his follow up work *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to The World*⁹, Rosa furthers his idea of alienation and defines it as a being a qualitative measure of one's relationship to the world. To this end, Rosa offers the notion of Resonance, which is another qualitative measure of one's relationship to the world, but this time in opposition to alienation. A bad relation that strains the individual will alienate them; a strong relation that serves the individual will resonate with them.

While Rosa's early framing of alienation was strongly tied to social acceleration following technological development and late-stage capitalism, this new definition of alienation lies closer to what Musto would define as subjective alienation. And while I believe it is important to frame alienation in its original economical context, I believe that Rosa succeeds in proposing the most comprehensive existential exploration of alienation and resonance to date.

Rosa's definition of alienation is relevant to us in that it defines how one can experience alienation or resonance in our contemporary society, which is the greater setting of any experience of art today. Before any interaction with art occurs, every individual is already subject to the quality of their relationship with their environment, whether it's through their financial situation, their social condition, their identity, or their history. Rosa's definition of alienation and resonance as qualitative measures of relationships can therefore be seen as applicable to the experience of art as a measure of the relationship between the participating elements of the artistic experience and the audience. This, however, requires a little clarification.

**To be a stranger in your own house;
To be a stranger in your own community;
To be a stranger to yourself;
To be a stranger and to recognize it;
To be a stranger and to not notice it at all.**



Part 2: Artists, Audiences, and their Relationships

When talking about the experience of art for the viewer, I am referring to the total relationship between an artwork and the audience. This relationship begins when one intersects with the artwork and includes the other relationships that inform (or influence) this relationship with the artwork. These instructive relationships are formed between different elements in the art experience. They can be any number of things that possess some agency over the experience of the artwork for the audience. For example the artist, the space, or even other audience members.

Because of how many possible variables exist in each individual experience of art, it would be exhaustive to attempt to pin down every possible element capable of influencing the experience of art. Because of this, forming a more general notion of the relationship between the elements that cumulate into the experience of art is important in order to understand the general guidelines of these relationships and their influence on the audience.

As such, let us define the artwork as the vector which embodies the intentions of the artist. In this sense, the artwork is an object of translation, from conscious and unconscious intentions, manifested into a physical, tangible form. This may be an object, but it may also be an action: its form does not really matter as long as it is a medium through which intention is expressed. We will also be defining the audience as whoever interacts with the artwork. To be more precise, I do not believe that you must engage with an artwork to be its audience, as the qualities of art make it so that it can affect us without our consent to engage (I will talk about this later on when referring to Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* as an example). We can therefore imagine that members of the audience are those who 'activate' the artwork by simply being in the presence of the artwork: whether consciously or not, the audience irreversibly creates a sort of string of influence between themselves and the artwork.

This relationship of influence is one that can be looked at through the lens of Stuart Hall's *Encoding and Decoding in The Television Discourse*¹⁰, a text that grips the fundamental dynamics of transformation of ideas in the communicative process of television. Many parallels can be drawn between Hall's text and systems of communication at large, but of course, for the sake of our ideas we will explore here how this text can help us deconstruct communication in the context of art.

Indeed, as we discussed above, the artwork can be seen as medium of intention. These intentions, through the vector by which they are manifested, are encoded into something tangible. In the experience of their then, tangible forms, these intentions are decoded and interpreted by the audience autonomously from their encoding. In other words, the encoding of intentions is the production process, and the decoding of these intentions is the reception of the artwork.

These processes are, as Hall puts it, "differentiated moments within the totality formed by the communicative process as a whole". Furthermore, in most methods of communication, the reception process is part of the production process. This is due to the codes that determine the production process being drawn from elements belonging collectively to the audience. Production is generally not a "closed system", but rather, influenced and formed in part by the reception process, through what Hall calls (in the context of television production) "skewed and structured "feed-backs". A very relevant example of this would be code switching, in which individuals change their manner of speaking depending on their environment to facilitate inclusion.

Reception being a part of the production process is the case in most instances of art being produced and received, but some exceptions apply. For example, as artworks age and last beyond the cultural context in which they were produced, the reception of an artwork evolves with the times.

While this may seem to add a layer to our conversation and might come off as a bit of a sidetrack, I simply want to emphasize the similarities and differences between Hall's text and the context of the arts. This is because artists often rely on various types of audience feedback as a method of gaging the effectiveness of their artworks.

To summarize, the artist encodes their intentions in the production of their artwork, intentions which are then decoded by the audience in their reception of the artwork. But if this were simply the case, we would have no personalization of interpretation: what the artist intended to communicate and what is understood by the audience would not differ. Hall reflects on this problem through his idea of symmetry in communication.

According to Hall, the level of "symmetry/a-symmetry" between the position of the "encoder-producer" and that of the "decoder-receiver" creates a "distortion" or "misunderstandings". Indeed, Hall ultimately argues that the encoding and decoding process is affected by external factors that impact the capacity of both the encoder and decoder to retain the fidelity of the initial message as intended by the encoder. Hall describes three categories of such factors: frameworks of knowledge, structures of production, and technical infrastructures.

These factors determine the symmetry of the communicative structure, which in turn will affect the communicative structure between the producer and the receiver. For example, communication codes (tragic, comedic, professional, cultural) are structures with shared collective knowledge that allow for a more faithful transmission of messages. The acknowledgment and collective understanding of these codes can be leveraged and subverted, for example for comedic effect with parodies, or for critical commentary through satire. This subversion is also the basis for rhetorical methods such as irony, and is also present in arts through the subversion of 'codes' for critical effect. Artists might then seek to leverage the a-symmetry of the communicative structure for a particular effect.

These different factors during the production-encoding process and the reception-decoding process, ultimately impact the foundation on which the relationship between the artwork and the audience member is built. As discussed earlier, the quality of this relationship affects the audience member and dictates the experience of the artwork by the audience. If the relationship is of poor quality, it may lead to a feeling of alienation by the audience member from the artwork.

In art, the factors which influence the communication structure are multiple in their variety: discourses, mediums, geographical spaces on multiple scales, language, socio-political context... The list is not exhaustive as anything that influences us as individuals will become a factor in the encoding-producing process as well as the decoding-receiving process.

In sum, alienation arises when influences affect the symmetry of the encoding-decoding process in a depreciative way. The qualitative measure of the experience of the artwork as medium of intentions depends as much on the encoding process as it does on the decoding process. All these processes are influenced by conditions unique to each artist, each artwork, and the individual circumstances of members of the audience. Let us expand then on the different elements which may influence the experience of the artwork for the audience.



- "It is the rage of a decadent period of artistic nullity against the titans of a past whose energy and originality we can't bear. We will be happier when all the masterpieces are destroyed and the museums no longer shove our decline in our faces."

- "My problem with genius? It gets in the way of art."

Part 3: Alienation and the Myth of the Artist

The relationship between the audience and the artist is one that is built around a certain amount of prejudice. As we discussed in Part 2, for the artist, the audience is the critical receiving end of the intentions contained within the artwork. All the while, the audience remains for the large part anonymous to the artist (yet another asymmetry). For the audience, the perception of the artist depends on multiple factors, which include those existing before the experience of the artwork, those that occur during their experience, and those that may come after the experience of the artwork.

Indeed, the experience of the artwork is not isolated. In some cases the exhibition text, the press release (which, as Hito Steyerl puts eloquently, “have the lifespan of a fruit fly and the farsightedness of a grocery list”¹¹), the audio guide, the History of Arts lessons, the Instagram content, and finally the hastily summarised biographies of the artist on Wikipedia, all come to shape the audience’s perception of the artist. This perceived idea of the artist, as existing in our collective imagination, is precisely what I believe the myth of the artist to be, in as practical a sense as possible. This idea of perception is important, because the myth of the artist is never objective, and a myth can exist in parallel to a very different reality. I will come back to this idea later when discussing the importance of recognizing this duality.

While this “myth” is dependent on individuals (both those who are part of the myth and those who entertain it), there are recurrent narrative themes that define the artist and shape the audience’s perception of the artist. These themes exist on different levels. Firstly, there is the generalised perception of the role and condition of the artist in society. Secondly, and (I believe) regrettably less importantly, there is the personalised story of the individual artist as transmitted to the audience. Finally, there is the understanding of such dynamics concerning the perception of the artist, which is essential to cover as full of a picture as possible in regard to the myth of the artist.

This first, generalised perception of the artist, is the bigger part of how artists are perceived today. It is a complex picture that has been slowly knitted in western culture for centuries, but has become firmly established in the era of commodification of personalities. This narrative often begins with the artist as asynchronous with their time. It will then continue by shaping the artist as a revolutionary in the face of tradition, a rebel and visionary genius, and finally, a leading authority. These ideas and narratives, in my frank opinion, reveal more about social dynamics than they do about art. Nonetheless, the idea of the artist as prophetic genius is the baseline from which we perceive art today.

This myth is rooted firmly enough to impact even the denomination of art and the artist today as ‘contemporary’. Indeed, it is Giorgio Agamben, in his analysis¹² of Nietzsche’s *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*¹³, who writes that the contemporary individual is one who, through their “deviation and anachronism [...] are more capable than others in perceiving and understanding the spirit of their time”. This definition of the contemporary individual by Agamben is one in which we can find hints of alienation of the reduced kind (alienation as a maladjustment to social norms, as noted by Musto). Indeed, the individual who is deviant from their time, is an alien to their temporality. This idea of the contemporary individual becomes all the more striking for us, when we recognize that the notion of the contemporary is one that is an identifying factor for artists today. Furthermore, as Agamben argues:

“The contemporary [individual] is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary [individual] is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping their pen in the obscurity of the present.”¹⁴

11 Hito Steyerl, “International Disco Latin”, E-Flux Journal Issue 45, 2013.

12 Giorgio Agamben, “What Is an Apparatus?” and Other Essays: And Other Essays (Stanford University Press, 2009).

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*: David Strauß, Der Bekenner Und Schriftsteller, 1893.

14 Agamben, “What Is an Apparatus?” *And Other Essays: And Other Essays*. p.19-20

As Agamben unfolds his thoughts here, he not only defines the condition of the contemporary, but also the function of the contemporary individual in relation to their times. This idea that an individual who possesses unique perspectives on their times, and combats alienation through creation, is exactly what makes the contemporary artist a contemporary individual. This idea and can be found being discussed in other corners of the arts, from Victor Hugo's *Fonction du poète*¹⁵, in which he draws a comparison between the artist and a prophet, to Baudelaire's *L'Albatros*¹⁶, in which he treats the theme of his Alienation, as an artist, from society.

However, while artists themselves explore their identity and position within society, they are not the only players in forming the myth of the artist. Indeed, the truth of the matter is that the myth of the artist is one of the mechanisms that allows the contemporary art industry to authenticate its value. After all, if we were to perceive artists negatively, there would be no incentive to finance the arts, especially in the era of streamlined, digital, profit driven capitalism we live in. There is a true financial motive behind such narratives, and at the centre of it all is one of art's most defining features. Because the appreciation of art remains largely subjective, establishing the cultural and (more vitally) the economic value of art is rather difficult to do.

Indeed, there is a true incentive behind conserving art from centuries or millennia's past as their value as witnesses of the history of humankind is undeniable. However, when art does not possess the value of age, then its value must be established by other means. One must then look elsewhere to surpass the subjective appreciation of art and establish the credibility of an artwork's importance.

As mentioned in the introduction, there is already a certain projection of our knowledge of history onto our present, especially in the arts. The key word here is *authority*. In the matters of the subjective, authority surpasses the possibility for plurality by creating the framework necessary to impose a subjective view as being objective.

This is something Walker Percy highlights in his essay *The Loss of the Creature*¹⁷, in which he explores the relation we have towards our experiences in the consumerist age. More specifically, he mentions the need for sightseers to have their experiences validated by experts, who, through their knowledge relative to the sightseer's experience, and through the surrendering of their sovereignty to experts, give rise to experts who possess authority over the experience of the sightseer. The expert can say: what you saw, what you felt, what you experienced, is the real deal. This responds to the sightseer's need to have their experience validated, and because of this, it is only in this manner that the sightseer can be satisfied by their experience. Percy frames this within his idea that any one thing that is experienced by individuals takes place in comparison to expectations, which is an important context to note in the citing of this text.

However, one can wonder if a similar dynamic establishes itself in the experience of art by the audience, especially when thinking of the myth of the artist and its importance in contemporary art today. It is for a reason that often when one refers to an artwork by a famous artist, they refer to the name of the artist and not the artwork (a figure of speech called metonymy). A Rothko, a Picasso, a Basquiat, a Miro, so on so forth. This is a hint that the myth of the artist is the carrier of authority which serves to validate the consumption of art for the viewer. If you like a painting which is made by an artist who possesses credibility through their myth, your experience of having seen a great artwork made by a great individual is validated, which makes you a great consumer because you too see the greatness in the work. Similarly, you might feel invalidated as an audience member if you do not like an exhibition, or artwork, which has been endorsed by experts.

While the myth of the artist now seems to serve a purpose in the consumption and monetary appraisal of art, its existence is also part of a more fundamental need for the viewer in the experience of art. Indeed, the act of elevating the contemporary artist to a visionary/prophet is one that is part of a heritage. This heritage can be seen as far back as the renaissance (to the best of my knowledge), where, for example, artists such as Fra Angelico evolved within the reputation and myth surrounding them. I will admit that there might appear as though my projection of the myth of the artist at the times of the renaissance seems as though it is an anachronism, but this is my point exactly. The myth of the artist is not a concept invented in our late-stage capitalist overtaking of art: it is a dynamic that exists naturally when the audience seeks to create an identity for the artist. It just so happens that in the age of consumerism, fundamental mechanisms of the art experience have been perverted and taken advantage of.

To further explore the implications of the myth of the artist, let us consider Fra Angelico, an early renaissance painter who was known to see painting as a form of prayer, and to weep continuously when painting crucifixion scenes¹⁸. This pious and morally generous nature gave him the name he is known by today: *Beato Angelico* (Blessed Angelic One), a title bestowed to him by Pope John II in 1982¹⁹.

One might ask oneself, '*What did I miss?*'

15 Victor Hugo, *Les Rayons Et Les Ombres*, 1840.

16 Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, 1857.

17 Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do With the Other* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1975).

18 William Michael Rossetti, "Angelico, Fra", In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Vol. 2 (11th ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1911 p. 6–8

19 Bunson, Matthew; Bunson, Margaret (1999). *John Paul II's Book of Saints. Our Sunday Visitor*. p. 156.

How Fra Angelico is perceived today is a curious thing to think about. While in his time he was certainly recognized as a great and humble artist, the nearly 600 years that have passed since his death have unavoidably created a shift in the relation between his works and the audience. As time dilutes the realities of history, Fra Angelico is survived by his works and by what limited historical knowledge we now possess of him. This is the basis of his myth, which, with time, deepens as generation after generation confront his works, in a cycle of elevation and validation of experiences through the authority of the expertise of previous generations closer to him in time. This cycle of linear and timely validation is what I would call the re-iteration of a myth. Perhaps it is because of this that one can no longer look at Fra Angelico as the individual he was, but instead as the icon he became through the re-iteration of his myth.

Fra Angelico is not an isolated case, as many other renaissance artists now have operational myths surrounding them, which influence the perception of their persons and their artworks. The key difference here between these renaissance artists' myths and the myths surrounding modern and contemporary artists lies in the amount of knowledge that is verifiable. As I mentioned above, the myth of the artist is all about perception. The problem with artists that are so distant from us is that they may have no primary historical sources remaining for us to contrast their myth with, or, even if there were such sources, a sense of myth still surrounds the historical era from which the artist is from. This happens to such an extent that even historically relevant information is unrelatable and covered in a narrative shroud.

One must then ask: if Fra Angelico and other artists are shrouded to such an extent in myth, are they alienated from contemporary audiences? The answer to this question is where my interest in these thoughts lays, and by the time we answer this question, I'm sure you will agree.

It must be said that the myth of perfection is dehumanizing in its authority. The genius, talented, visionary artist is only made so through other's perception. When myth prevails over reality in the context of an individual's life, there is no history left to relate to. As I said before, this transformation from human artist to mythical icon severs a very real connection between the audience and the artist. Instead, it creates a connection between the audience and the myth of the artist. Will this inherently sever the relationship between the artwork and the audience? Certainly not, but it may influence it. Indeed, many artists from the renaissance have celebrated works, drawing millions of tourists and influencing many more over the past centuries. But do we travel to see the artworks for what they are, or because a cycle of myth consolidation creates the reputation necessary for an absolute experience of awe. I think this raises the question of how we decide to relate to these artists and artworks. The myth of the artist is not the artist, it is a fragment of their history and as such of their person. By reiterating the myth of an artist, we eventually reduce them to it, alienating them from their own story and artworks.

To summarize, either we resonate with the myth of the artist, which, as we discussed, is more akin to legend than history, or we are alienated from these artists due to the nature of their myths. In either case, due to the impossibility we have to relate to the artist as a "real" individual, all that is left is their myth, the perceived idea of their person, or their function as an artist. This impossibility is what makes the myth of these artists possess so much authority over the audience, and what transforms them from relatable individuals to icons with time. It is my opinion that this invariably affects the reception of the artwork by the audience, as the complexities of the dynamics between the artist, their myth, and the knowledge of these myths by the audience are ever present and evolve independently from the artwork.

To end part 3 and link these various different thoughts together, let me refer back to part 2. In the case of the encoding and decoding of artworks, this idea of the myth of the artist is a factor influencing the *decoding* of the artwork. This influence has been a central part of the environment of the arts for a long time, not only due to our need for validation in the experience of art (Percy), but also due to our need to create an identity for the artist whose artworks we enjoy, even if we cannot do so accurately (in the case of older artists). These conditions set up the perfect stage for the myth of the artist to possess the authority that it does, an authority which ultimately affects our reception of artworks, even when we are aware of such dynamics. However, as complex and fundamental this dynamic may be in our experience of art, this is a rather internal mechanism, one that I would argue is not formed in our perception of the artwork per se, but rather our knowledge surrounding (but not necessarily including) the artwork. To contrast this exploration of internal dynamics in the reception of artworks, let us look at possible external influences.

“The viewer becomes aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza. As he moves, the sculpture changes. Contraction and expansion of the sculpture result from the viewer’s movement. Step by step the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes.”



Part 4: *Tilted Arc, a Study of the Effects of Spatial Context in the Reception of an Artwork*

As we have established, many variables are at play in the reception of an artwork. These involve systems of knowledge and mechanisms in the consumption of the artwork, as seen in part 3, but there are also external factors that co-exist with these internal mechanisms. To further explore external factors, let us look at one of the most crucial elements in the experience of any artwork: the space it occupies.

Indeed, the artwork is dependent on the space it is presented in. This has always been a truthful feature in our perception of art, and in some cases the space is what defines the artwork above anything else: from cave paintings to *in situ* art, either our perception of the artwork depends on the space it is shown in, or the space is the conceptual bond by which the artwork justifies itself.

Space is an important factor to recognise, because both the artist and audience's perception of the artwork is intrinsically a special one. The artist must be aware of a space's impact on the artwork, for context is everything, especially as the art space is one that transforms, elevates, and gives credibility to artworks. Artists have already taken advantage of and explored the qualitative aspect of the art space.

For instance, artworks like Duchamp's *urinal* are works whose quality as an artwork lies not in its craftsmanship as it is a readymade object, but in the context in which it is consciously placed, and acted on by the artist. This activation of the relationship between the artwork and the environment in which it evolves is now an unavoidable factor to consider in the art making process. However, as new relations are forged between the artwork, the artist, the audience, and the environment, one must consider the impact such a relationship can have on the different parties involved.

As an example, let us think of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which shook the New York City public enough for them to seek legal action in order to remove the artwork from the plaza. All arguments were used (from the artwork being an eyesore, to it possibly facilitating bomb blasts) in order to discredit the artwork and argue its misplacement in the bustling Federal Plaza for which it was commissioned²⁰. What is so intriguing about this reception by the public is simply how much of an effect *Tilted Arc* had on the individuals who interacted with the sculpture.

Beyond the fact that people had to physically acknowledge and interact with the sculpture because of how it intersected the plaza, the general consensus appeared to be that the artwork revolted many, confused others, and angered the rest. This occurred at the cost of the few who would make use of it (it was mentioned during the trial that the sculpture, thanks to its acoustic features, was a prime location for buskers to play). Serra's artwork was successful in intervening in space, but it came at the cost of alienating commuters from the space they knew; the artwork had changed the plaza uncompromisingly.

It is also important to note that this was the vision pursued by Serra when making the artwork. Indeed, he had been a pioneer of site-specific art along with other sculptors in the 1970s. Such artists sought to navigate the special relationship between the artwork and the space it would be placed in. Serra famously said during the public hearing that "to move the work is to destroy the work"²¹.

As a result of Serra's intentions, the artwork differed strongly from the expectations of the public towards the space. Serra, in his encoding of the artwork, sought to sabotage the communication process by pursuing the asymmetry between his desire to disrupt space and the use of the public space by the audience. I imagine that the experience of disruption and subsequent intellectual value of such an experience would outweigh the unpleasantness of it. I think a lot of Serra's work has to do with this very idea: special intervention in which Serra takes initiative in an uncompromising manner, which, in the context of the art space, is often successful. However, the alienating factor in the case of *Tilted Arc* is the fact that Serra seized the initiative in a space that already had a defined function created through public use by pedestrians. This is to say that by trying to dictate the dynamic of what appeared to be a non-space, Serra accidentally impeded on the culture of the space, which is likely why it got rejected to such an extent.

Serra's work serves as a great example of showing the ways in which this functional dynamic between the audience and the artwork is something that artists have been deconstructing through different pursuits. In this case, by challenging the space in which the artwork evolves in and binding the space to the artwork in such a way that neither can be without the other.

20 Paper Tiger, "The Trial of Tilted Arc With Richard Serra," January 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxyhGUAYvB4>.

21 Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, Routledge eBooks, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203138298>.

I do believe that there is an interesting link to be made here, once again, with Walker Percy's essay. Indeed, in his text, he mentions the fallacy of misplaced concreteness which is an idea proposed by Alfred North Whitehead in his book *Science of the Modern World*²². As Percy explains it, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness is "the mistaking of an idea, a principle, an abstraction, for the real". Percy further defines the consequences of such a fallacy, stating that "as a consequence of the shift, the "specimen" is seen as less real than the theory of the specimen. Percy notes that Kierkegaard said, once a person is seen as a specimen of a race or a species, at that very moment he ceases to be an individual"²³. One might therefore ask, when thinking of the experience of artworks in relation to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, if our experiences of artworks operate under the same fallacy.

Indeed, in the case of Serra's *Tilted Arc*, one can only truly appreciate its effectiveness when one is knowledgeable of what it seeks to subvert. However, to the audience member unaware of the discourses and dynamics of art, the sculpture is a hindrance, a security threat, an eye sore, in short, a problem. One could wonder if it is not a matter of being able to categorize the artwork in order to decide which expectations one should have to measure their experience against. Or one could wonder if it is also a matter of possessing the knowledge necessary to allow the possibility of making such a conceptual shift, transforming the influence from an external one, into an internal one.

I think this is the biggest reason why Serra's work failed with the larger public, and why a lot of "conceptual" art might fail to resonate with an audience that is not familiar with the theory that may be associated with these works.

If we are to follow Percy's advice, we should be prepared to overcome not only the proposed method of consumption of experiences, but also our desire to rationalize experiences through theory as a method of validating them. In this sense, and in the case of Serra's work, the audience member most true to Percy's idea is the audience member that, through whatever means they possess, circumvent external influences in their experience of the artwork, and do not seek to compare their experiences or validate them through theory.

However, there is a reliance by the contemporary artist on the audience possessing the knowledge required to bridge the artwork with the theory it relates to. In the case of Serra's *Tilted Arc* (and by extension many other contemporary artworks), the work became inaccessible to the audience because it relied on a relation to theory when it was produced. When *Tilted Arc* was received, if there is no such knowledge of the theory to which it refers, the artwork will be perceived on different terms than intended by the artist due to the asymmetry of the communicative structure.

To quote Arthur Danto: "What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is (in a sense of *is* other than that of artistic identification)".²⁴

One must then ask, if the audience can be alienated from the artist through the myth of the artist (which the artist might have little control over), and the audience can be alienated from the artwork through asymmetry in the communication process (which again, the artist has little control over), **where does the agency of the artist lie?**

This recognition and embracing of the importance of space in the consumption of art is a very central theme in art discourse today. The idea of the white cube, the museum space, the role of the curator, and the institution have or are in the process of being deconstructed/criticized for the ways in which they impact (and the implications of such an impact) on the experience of art by the audience. And through our recognition of the importance of the topic of space in the experience of art, we transform it from being an external influence, to also being an internal one. In the same way that one's knowledge of the myth of the artist affects one's reception of art, knowing of artist intended a work to be site-specific will radically change the audience's reception of an artwork.

22 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World: Lowell Lectures, 1925* (Signet Book, 1925).

23 Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do With the Other*.

24 Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (October 15, 1964): 571, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2022937>.

***To consume; to be consumed;
To experience; to be experienced;
To be forgotten; only to be seen again,
as if for the first time.***



Part 5: The Artist in the Face of Alienation (Or my Frank Opinion in the Face of this Whole Ordeal)

This part of the thesis serves as a personal conclusion to this text. I want to be able to write and share what I believe all these ideas mean to me, concretely. In a similar way, I hope that you, the reader, will be able to reach your own conclusions. The honest reason behind this conclusion is because the more I explored the ideas presented in this thesis, the more difficult it became to write about them.

You see, as an art practitioner, my motivation lies in wishing that I can create a successful experience for the audience. I hope that one day, just as I have had the chance to deeply connect with artworks, somebody will sit in front of a work I have made and experience something that will also positively impact them. Ultimately, I am interested in creating positive experiences.

Perhaps this is also true for other artists and art practitioners. Art starts as a pursuit for the artist, and because of this, there is a transaction being made with the audience. The artist receives satisfaction in producing work and providing experiences for the audience who, in turn, receives and consumes them. Due to the subjective nature of art, there is also the undeniable truth that to have your art received well is external validation of your pursuit as an artist.

But I recognize that the reception of any work is beyond the agency of the artist. As I say in this thesis: an accumulation of factors both internal and external influence the quality of the communication process. This will inform the relationship between the audience and the artwork, and in turn will resonate with them or alienate them. This is the truth of the experience of art: the reception of an artwork depends as much on the circumstances of the reception as it does on the work of art itself. In this sense, the artwork -as carrier of intention- does not solely belong to the artist. The artwork is a collective possession, divided between the producer (artist), the circumstances in which the artwork is received (context), and the receiver (audience).

This collective possession is an immaterial form of possession. Practically speaking, the artwork may very well be owned by one party rather than another, but the experience of the artwork can happen collectively. Interestingly, and especially if we are to talk about ownership, there are strong links to be made with Marx's exploration of objective alienation. Indeed, just as the laborer is alienated from a product they produce but do not own, the artist is alienated from an artwork which ultimately, when they sell or give away, will not belong to them. This is the case physically, if the artwork is made to be sold, but also intellectually, if the experience of the artwork by the audience is an experience that will ultimately alienate the artist.

One must also consider that with time, the artist changes and grows. In the same way that one might stumble on an old diary and read, as a spectator, details of a life they had forgotten, an artist may look back at works they have produced while no longer being the producer. If they are no longer the producer, having lost all intimacy and presence and detailed memory of when the work was made, to an extent they too become members of the audience, and open themselves to being alienated from their work in this way.

But even considering all of this, today, we still have both art being produced, and artists producing it. The dynamics concerning the reception of art by the audience, regardless of their origins, are a reality in the arts that cannot be dismissed, even if I personally strongly question the nature of consumption of art today.

Even if one faces alienation through what is produced, who it is produced for, or how it is received, the artist remains the starting point of the art experience. In this sense, and to loosely refer one final time to Walker Percy's essay, the artist is the one that discovers and resonates through *discovery*, while the audience is the party that experiences and resonates through *experience*. Even if the means to their resonance differs, there is solace in their shared adoration for the object of art.

So then, as an artist, what is one to do if they desire to overcome the apparent inevitability of alienation in the experience of art? *What comes next?*

It is one thing to deconstruct the relational dynamics of the experience of art, it is another to reimagine them.

What I do know is that I feel a fundamental discomfort in the art experience in the contemporary art space when art remains inaccessible. It would appear to me that what can influence an audience's experience of artworks is precisely what needs to disappear in order to leave room for the audience to have a purer experience of the artwork. By this, I refer to the marketing material, the exhibition texts, the social media posts, the need to validate the experience through experts, and so on. The experience of the artwork must be singular and deeply personal, like seeing a sunrise or the view from a mountain top. This reinforces the truth that what the audience sees and feels is already more than the artwork itself, and anything that can be said about it.

I believe (for now at least) that there must be some departure from the artistic codes that are omnipresent in our collective understanding of what art is. An artwork that is recognized as being an artwork is subject to scrutiny and prejudice. To make art that is not immediately recognizable as art may be the way out of this cycle of perception, perhaps through Guerilla art, or some other effort.²⁵ Ultimately, the artist must understand the mechanisms behind the experience of art for the viewer and be pragmatic about if they wish to challenge them.

I am hopeful about what can be done in the face of all these questions and ideas. Especially by accepting that the experience of art does not belong to the institutions, or consumerist society. When many moons go by, and society parts ways with its current constructs, art will still exist.

The artist belongs to nobody, and that is ok.

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