

# Art and the dream of self-transcendence

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Given a fundamental ontology that takes materiality to be essentially “no-thingness”, I explore the claim that humans create art in response to the dream of self-transcendence. I unpack the paradoxical idea that transcendence is as much materialisation as the dissolution of existing formations. This is elaborated through three echoing “iterations” in which this idea of art as self-transcendence is “repeated differently”. I consider art as construction of a “semblance” (Lacan), best understood as an unceasing play between the serious, dynamic economy of self-edification and the ironic aneconomy of self-dissolution (Derrida). I shift attention to art-making as the expression of this dynamic in another body, and consider the difference between “signature” and “factor”, the role of Lacan’s object “a” and the idea of “the zone”. Finally, since there is no self without another self to recognise it as such, I consider art as a declaration of love, and artworks as “love-machines” (Deleuze & Guattari) that function as a call for mirroring repetition in the other’s empathic response. This conceptual framework suggests a way to distinguish between art and artifice.

**Key words:** fundamental ontology, self-transcendence, materialisation, art, love, empathy, artifice

## **Kunst en het ideaal van zelftranscendentie**

In het licht van een fundamentele ontologie die materialiteit in wezen opvat als “on-dingelijkheid”, onderzoek ik de bewering dat mensen kunst creëren als antwoord op het ideaal van zelftranscendentie. Ik verken het paradoxale idee dat transcendentie evenzeer materialisatie is als het verdwijnen van bestaande formaties. Dit wordt in detail uitgewerkt in drie resonerende “iteraties” waarin het idee van kunst als zelftranscendentie “verschillend herhaald” wordt. Ik beschouw kunst als het construeren van een “gelijkenis” (Lacan), wat best begrepen wordt als een onophoudelijk spel tussen de ernstige, dynamische economie van zelschepping enerzijds en de ironische anti-economie van zelfvernietiging (Derrida). Vervolgens richt ik de aandacht op kunstproductie als een uiting van die dynamiek in een ander lichaam en diep ik het verschil uit tussen “signature” en “factor”, de rol van Lacan’s “object a” en het begrip “zone”. Omdat er geen zelf kan zijn dat niet erkend wordt als zelf door een ander zelf, zie ik kunst als een liefdesverklaring en kunstwerken als “liefdesmachines” (Deleuze & Guattari) die fungeren als vraag naar weerspiegelende herhaling in het empathische antwoord van de ander. Dit conceptueel kader laat toe een onderscheid te maken tussen kunstwerk en artefact.

**Trefwoorden:** fundamentele ontologie, zelftranscendentie, materialisatie, kunst, liefde, empathie, artefact

One of the most powerful answers to the question of why humans create art (and in this, “artifice” already resonates as another question) is, “in response to the dream of self-transcendence”. But this answer is immediately complicated by the ambiguity of the concept “transcendence” within the context of a fundamental ontological materialism whereby, firstly, one may dispose of a two-world hypothesis and any kind of “god-delusion” (Dawkins 2007), and secondly, in agreement with particle physicists (Peaks 2013), Taoists (Lao Tzu 1989) and Lacan (1981: 53-60) on “the Real”, one may take the material world to be at bottom essentially “no-thingness”. In this case, as much as it is materialisation or formation, transcendence is also the dissolution of existing formations. In what follows I consider the meaning of art as self-transcendence given this fundamental ontology that requires us to think in terms of the paradox of “immanent transcendence”.

## Fundamental ontology and the paradox of “immanent transcendence”

A sense of upwardness is inscribed in the etymology of “transcendence” – from the Latin *trans* (“across” or “beyond”) and *scandere* (“climb”). “Climb” on its own, unqualified by “up” or “down”, connotes ascendancy and “beyond” in conjunction with “climb” implies the upward movement of “surpassing”. The opposite of “transcendence” is said to be “immanence” denoting that which remains subject to the limitations of the material universe. The movement of transcendence is therefore strongly reminiscent of Plato’s (1892: 214-217) well-known cave allegory, whose sense depends on the two-world divide that reduces the philosophical conception of materiality to the terms of finitude. Divided by birth and death from the eternal realm of pure spirit, the material universe was understood as impermanent, decadent and bounded. Embodiment represented a “fall” from grace that imprisoned the human soul in base materiality. On this account, transcendence becomes a uniquely human preoccupation. For neither animal (soulless embodiment) nor god (disembodied soul) is transcendence an option. It is the in-between being, the embodied soul, who dreams of escaping corporeal incarceration in an upward journey towards the spiritual light of the eternal Divine. The desiring being dreams of freedom from desire; the self dreams of selflessness.

The “age of science” broke the lengthy hold the two-world cosmology had on the western imagination. In his *System of Nature*, Baron d’Holbach (Baumer 1978: 407) banished the gods as chimeras as it became clear that qualities such as eternity and generativity could be accounted for well enough on a materialist hypothesis. Holbach (Baumer 1987: 410-411) insisted that “matter always existed; that it moves by virtue of its essence; that all the phenomena of Nature is ascribable to the diversified motion of the variety of matter she contains; and which, like the phenix, is continually regenerating out of her own ashes”. Diderot (Baumer 1978: 412) agreed: “Everything changes, everything passes away – only the Whole endures. The world is perpetually beginning and ending; every moment is its beginning and its end; there has never been any other kind of world and there never will be any other”.

This early scientific materialism repeats certain tenets of ancient Taoism for which the “wheel of time” is the main metaphor for a thoroughly material universe (*Tao*). Although things in the universe come and go, the material universe itself does not. *Tao* was not born, will not die, but remains as the eternal source of all coming and going. Because *Tao* is formless, it never increases or decreases, progresses or regresses. There is just *Tao* that is constantly being formed, unformed and reformed (Lao Tzu 1989: 29, Section 14).

Pushing further, contemporary particle physics echoes the many formulations in the *Tao Te Ching* telling us that *Tao* is essentially “nothingness” (Lao Tzu 1989: 29, Section 14). This is not to suggest that the material substrate has no being – just that its being is not at bottom “thingly”. Scrutinised closely through our super-sensitive perceptual prosthetics, all things yield their fundamental “nothingness”. Sandy Peaks (2013) puts together an accessible description of today’s Standard Model, which describes a universe of particles, forces, anti-matter, as well as electromagnetic and nuclear interactions.

According to the Standard Model, all matter consists of two types of particle, quarks and leptons (such as electrons and neutrinos) which are held together by bosons. Bosons are associated with a force. There are elementary and composite bosons. The three elementary bosons of the Standard Model are called gauge bosons. These include the photon (the electromagnetic force), W and Z bosons (the weak force), and gluons (strong force.) Then there are two suspected but unobserved bosons: the Graviton and the Higgs boson.

If transcendence is traditionally associated with a movement beyond materiality towards the spiritual, and self-transcendence implies an upward shift from body to soul, what happens to the movement of transcendence when the two-world cosmology is replaced by a single material universe, understood as the eternal flux of seemingly massless particles and forces? First of all, one must seek to understand transcendence within the material, which means working with the paradoxical concept of “immanent transcendence”. This does not significantly damage the etymology of transcendence, since the word could merely suggest a shift across from one material state to another or reaching beyond borders; as the divine madness of Eros might temporarily transcend the bounds of reason, or the habitat of elephants might transcend the bounds of national borders.

On a materialist hypothesis, “immanent transcendence” becomes a question of what it means to transcend a flux of unstable particles and forces. For something to happen, for time and space themselves to happen, the flux must be arrested for a duration. In this case, transcendence, as climbing across to the other side, occurs when a thing emerges out of no-thingness, or when formation occurs for a duration in the flux. Paradoxically, transcendence becomes, in the first place, the art of creating finitude. The formation of material reality as a highly complex manifold of enduring, albeit temporary, phenomena occurs both automatically (“by nature”) and by design, when creatures form things for a purpose.

At its most fundamental level, automatic formation is tied to the recently confirmed Higgs boson; “the elusive subatomic speck sometimes called the ‘God particle’” (Heilprin 2013). The particles described in the Standard Model are apparently massless. To explain why the matter built from them nevertheless has mass, the British physicist Peter Higgs theorised the existence of the particle that now carries his name. “Scientists believe the particle acts like molasses or snow: When other tiny basic building blocks pass through it, they stick together, slow down and form atoms” (Heilprin 2013). Another example of a similarly automatic formative process is the synthesis (whether or not originally on earth) of complex organic molecules, such as amino acids, from simpler chemicals (Yong 2011).

While one might speak metaphorically of nature’s creativity, the immanent transcendence usually associated with art takes shape, at the other end of the continuum, as formation by design. It is not necessary here to detail the shift from automatic formation to formation by design, suffice it to say that it occurs with increasing complexity, probably at the point of self-organisation in an already sensate, living organism, which, in turn, develops into consciousness, and then self-consciousness along with the unconscious (Hegel 1977: 110; Morin 2008: 43-48). The various forms of consciousness are, by definition, subjective, but one should be careful not to take this to mean that they are entirely private. Consciousness, as a complex concept, entails both private and shared dimensions. Something like Kant’s forms of intuition, for example, are the universally shared, subjective conditions of possibility for the kind of perception we call human and ordinary (a manifold of objects in up to three-dimensional space characterised by a directional flow in time). One may speak of “reality” in terms of both the natural formation of the “automaton” and the artful formation of the “semblance”. This is a term I have taken from Lacan to refer to an individual’s subjectivity or being-in-the-world, but I am wary of attributing this particular meaning to him. Another caveat must be noted, namely that no creature’s formations (art/artifice) can transcend the laws of the automaton. In humans, formation of reality as a semblance is both explicit or intentional and unconscious. It is also highly complex due to our capacity for abstraction, which enables us to imagine alternatives, project future consequences, communicate through multiple kinds of language rather than direct signalling, empathise and so on. This higher level functioning, enables us to pretend, lie, and fantasise. The formations

that constitute an individual's semblance are intrinsically imbued with extremely complex, self-reflective, abstract significance. As Heidegger (1962: 377) has always insisted, there are no bare phenomena. It is an abstraction to think of perception as pure or neutral. Instead, we are beings whose perception is always already "coloured" by existential cares and interests.

Although I have emphasised formation, which is associated with relative stability, it is as important to note that all phenomena inevitably call for their own evolutionary overcoming. Some evolve too slowly for us to notice and they seem eternal from a human perspective, some shift observably, but all appearances eventually become obsolete and disappear.

In the context of this fundamental ontology, art as the dream of self-transcendence may be elaborated through three echoing "iterations" (Derrida 1998: 31). In what follows, I first consider art as the construction of my "semblance", which is best understood as an unceasing play between the serious, dynamic economy of self-edification and the ironic, perhaps humorous, aneconomy of self-dissolution (Derrida 1982: 8-9; 19). I then shift attention to art-making as the expression of this dynamic self, or its recursive complexification, in both performance works that problematise and re-form my own body and "plastic" recreations of another body. In this case, my "signature" might be repeated consciously, while simultaneously my abyssal "factor" is inscribed unconsciously (in work that emerges from "the zone"), as a Lacanian object "a" that represents it negatively. Finally, accepting that there is no self without another self to recognise it as such, and that art therefore is never one-sided self-creation, I consider art as a declaration of love and argue that works of art function as "love-machines" through which an artist calls for a mirroring repetition of the self in the other's empathic response. Here I follow Deleuze & Guattari (1983: 5) when they insist that: "Desiring-machines are binary machines, obeying a binary law or set of rules governing associations: one machine is always coupled with another". This conceptual framework suggests a way to distinguish between art and artifice, whereby artifice is marked by the vain desire to arrest art's play, uncouple the other's desire in effect and "protect" the self through narcissistic enclosure.

### **Art as the construction of my "semblance"**

The originary formation for humans is the "semblance". The primary infantile state, albeit short-lived, is one of relative dissipation in a polymorphous flux of sensations that lacks a coherent sense of self. The Lacanian Real (Lacan 1981: 53-60) can be mapped onto this infantile sense of amorphous dissolution which is associated, ambivalently, with both joy and the intense anxiety of a smothering incapacity that must be overcome. Dissipation, surrendering openness to the flux of forces, is both immensely relieving and life threatening. Adults may toy again with its possibilities, but infants are hard-wired to form themselves against their initial openness to the flux of forces. Lacan derived a limited number of subjective structures from the way this negation or abjection of the Real occurs. A psychotic structure is produced if something goes awry, and the Real is foreclosed upon. Denial or repression of the Real produces "normal" (perverse or neurotic) subjects, who occasionally encounter the Real throughout life in different ways, for example as the nauseating idea of spatial infinity, or as a catastrophic event (Fink 1997: 116).

Self-transcendence is the art of making myself appear from out of the dizzying flux of potentiality that is the Real me. The "semblance" is my reality as formed through my human perception, which includes a complex configuration of factors. These include our humanly shared, basic, instinctual, emotional systems and formal, perceptual faculties, which offer us three dimensional space as well as time as succession. Our individualised sensory apparatus,

cognitive capacities and degree of emotional responsiveness add what is unique or unshared in perception. Finally, perceptual reality is coloured by our unevenly shared meaning-making capacities conditioned by discourses or cultures.

This perceptual process entails a radical selectivity. The force-field that affects us is far too extensive for us to take in. We automatically screen out stimulations beyond a certain range just because of the physiological limitations of our sense receptors and faculties of organisational synthesis, which only allow perception of space in three dimensions and of time as succession. We also avail ourselves of the screening process of conscious attention and focus and we are radically selective concerning the meaning of what becomes phenomenal. Disturbances in any of our processes of selective filtering would make it impossible to structure, produce, create and hold onto a coherent perceptual reality.

Using this configuration of faculties as they develop and complexify, formation of a semblance includes three life-long tasks that emerge consecutively. From the first flicker of desire, I begin emerging from my dissipation in the polymorphous flux of pleasures and sensations (the Real). My first tasks, my “body-works”, involve forming my body as a meaningful entity in continuous involvement with a surrounding environment. Obviously within contingently given constraints, I form not only a meaningful body, but also to some extent what surrounds it; through costumes and collections, for example, and significant spaces. My second task involves “ego-formation”, or the materialisation of tastes, desires, quirks, phobias etc. in something loosely called “personality”. Ego formation occurs in continuous involvement with other significant individuals or alter-egos. Full self-reflection is developed when I desire another person’s desire (that is, recognition of my human subjectivity by another human). This desire for recognition implies that I am able to step back from myself, or abstract myself from immediate immersion in my concerns, and see myself as a finite “I-thing” in the world that came into being and will die. My Real ineffability or invisibility is transcended and something phenomenal called “me” from which I am distanced is materialised. I can now say *there* I am, in that mirror or picture there, or *that* is me described in the text. I have begun to create a reflected I (“*moi*”) as a “semblance”, a fictional limitation of all that potentially can emerge in my perceptual field. My third task involves forming an identity or place in symbolic networks. My aim is to find a place among people, and within discursive frameworks concerning the meaning of being. In Lacanian terms this symbolic order is sometimes called the “Big Other”.

The active “I” (“*Je*”) or the creative agent that produces the semblance is itself a product of the automaton, it has no answer to the “why” of its own existence. This “I” that produces the semblance by responding to, appropriating and screening stimuli, is as occulted as the force field it interacts with. Perceptual reality (the semblance) is something that happens in between two occulted terms – the force-field and I. In other words, I essentially remain a secret, even to myself. This is why I can shock myself.

Interestingly, all of this places art at the base of human existence. Art is not mere imitation, but originary self-creation. Self-transcendence becomes the art of transcending my Real invisibility through materialisation in which I make myself visible as a semblance. An encounter with the abyssal Real must, through abjection/negation, take us beyond the eternal flux of nothingness through continuously self-surpassing materialisation. I do not think, however, that this reversal simply replaces the opposing idea that humans also create art to transcend the limits of the phenomenal. Our recognition of the very necessity of abjection/negation of the Real simultaneously threatens the bounds of that materialisation by showing it up for the

“semblance”, the silly self-protective device, it really is. The Real in me eternally transcends the visibilities I artfully (artificially) put in place to form myself without doing myself justice.

When awareness of this abyssal being breaks into everyday consciousness, we are faced with Heideggerian “dread” or its equivalent Nietzschean “nihilism”. Both refer to the nauseating terror associated with absurdity and senselessness *and* the exhilarating excitement associated with potency and freedom. For Lacan, dread is the consequence of an encounter with the traumatic, abyssal Real. This encounter frees me to live with joyful abandon, recreating myself anew in defiance of conventional strictures. But the joyful freedom of self-recreation is one of two heads belonging to a conjoined twin who share a single stem that cannot be divided without killing both. The abyssal stem is a quasi-transcendental. If transcendental thinking concerns itself with the conditions that make what is given in experience possible, quasi-transcendental thinking, adds that economic conditions of possibility (the conditions of systematic closure), while necessary, are ruined by the equally necessary aneconomic moment intrinsic to them, which make the given, strictly speaking, impossible (Derrida 1982: 8-9; 19). The freedom that comes from an encounter with the abyss, is wrested from the engulfing, dissolving, paralysing horror of the monstrous that you have to abject. And a trace of that trauma can never be fully erased. There is no joyful freedom without the risk of an engulfing horror in face of which your semblance becomes an absurdly little thing; an obscenity lurking behind the lace curtain.

The art of life, in sum, as the will to self-transcendence, is best understood in terms of an irreducible negotiation between the economic and aneconomic movements of self-transcendence. The semblance is a person’s first work of art. We are selves by virtue of both an economic, formative art that transcends the ineffable Real and the deforming, aneconomic reminder, in a traumatic encounter with the Real, that formation is but a necessary fiction, in which case the phenomenal semblance itself can and should be transcended. “Why the normative injunction?” If we cling to the belief in an attainable, stable truth, Nietzsche (1990: 66) asks rhetorically, do we not “actually live *by means of* a continual process of deception?” On the other hand, he adds, the necessity of fictionalization, to stay the flux temporarily, need not be seen as a tragic human flaw and the end of all real value. Instead he enjoins us to affirm this gift of creative transcendence for it in fact allows us to promote value in the subtle art of inventing, resisting, transvaluing and reinventing all determinate values. “Art”, Nietzsche (1990: 66) concludes, “is more powerful than knowledge, because *it* desires life”.

### **Art-making as the recursive complexification of self-formation**

How does making art, more traditionally understood, fit into this ontology of unceasing self-transcendence? To answer this, I follow Maleuvre (2006: 282), and the many artists he echoes, when he remarks: “What, after all, is art if not personalities expressing themselves and imparting human design upon matter?” Again, he remarks: “A work of art is made by *someone*”. To claim that a work is “just a systematic or random or nonintentional assemblage” (Maleuvre 2006: 284) is to render it utterly pointless. This allows the arrogant critic to insist that the work’s meaning is what the critical audience makes of it. But why would anyone make art at all if the author is stripped of a voice and an audience might just as well make meaning from a decomposing wall?

Without wishing to insist that artists have complete control over the meaning of their works, I am sympathetic to the claim that every mark or gesture is in some sense self-expression. On this hypothesis, making art can be thought of as the recursive complexification of self-formation. Because the Real “I” represented by my semblance remains an eternal secret, even to myself,

I am never satisfied that my semblance transcends my own no-thingness. Taoist philosophies notwithstanding, the in-between being, congenitally dissatisfied with the way things are, cannot passively let things be and eternally dreams of creating something beyond “what already is”.

In “placing myself outside of myself” I express something of the self I already am in another kind of body (my own body as “performed” or the “plastic” recreation of another body). Art must use material to inscribe the self in a body: flesh and bone, earth, words that I configure on a page, marks I make on canvas, wood I form, glass I shatter, keys I press, strings I pluck, ingredients I put together, movements I make in dance, electronic sensors I manipulate. In this externalisation I repeat myself differently. As Jill Di Donato (2013), for example, puts it: “Writing ... gave me a way to externalize my experiences and turn them into something apart from me, crafted, and yet intimately connected to me at the same time”. In this sense, self-repetition in artistic externalisation is inherently transformative. Self-externalisation in performance art is often explicitly a resistant response to cultural strictures and imposed stereotypes. This is clear in the feminist neo-burlesque and “postporn” scenes begun roughly in the 1990s, where stereotyping is explicitly resisted by the expression of an alternative aesthetics of feminist sexual representation characterised by “polymorphous perversity” (the term is Freud’s). See, for example, Lucía Egaña Rojas’ (2011) documentary: “My sexuality is an artistic creation”. Often darkly humourous, neo-Burlesque performances reflect a postmodern sensibility that is “ironic, reflexive, exaggerated, historical, political, cheerfully sleazy” (Acocella 2013: 69). Aiming for an empowering enjoyment of feminine sexuality in its multiplicity, they are characteristically transgressive. In Acocella’s words (2013: 69): “In an atypically jokeless number, Julie Atlas Muz appears, gagged, with nothing on but a heavy rope coiled around her body. To the tune of ‘You Don’t Own Me’, she struggles free”.

Art certainly must take responsibility for the life-giving recursive complexification (transgressive repeating-differently) of the formed self. Insisting on this, however, should not allow us to forget that the very idea of transgression and “other possibilities” only makes sense on the assumption that there is in the first place formative repetition of the same. An artwork, I propose, as the reiteration of self-formation is simultaneously formation and transgression of the self.

When I make art, I repeat both my phenomenal “signature” (economic) and my ineffable “factor” (aneconomic). My phenomenal “signature” is a defining personal style that represents the unique way my semblance is put together. It is inscribed in the myriad perceivable materialities that constitutes “me”: the special sound of my voice or footsteps, the unique marks I make and so on. The same signature recognised repeatedly over contingent changes represents me uniquely. Even if a group of artists strenuously try to represent only what can be seen, they still end up with a collection of works that are not exactly like one another. Even the effort to extract your signature paradoxically inscribes it in the way you try to delete yourself. My aesthetic signature draws my works together in a coherent body that represents me. My “signature works” indicate when I come into my own as an artist, or when I have found myself in my work.

My “factor” names that which gets me going, a deeply disturbing desire that points only to my lack, my abyss. As Žižek (2006: 48) puts it: “There is nothing uplifting about our awareness of this factor: it is uncanny, horrifying even, since it somehow dispossesses the subject”. Lacan’s object “a” functions as the phenomenal clue to my factor, the cypher that stands in the work as a clue to the abyssal no-thingness of the Real in me, the monstrosity within that I can only approach with dread – trembling with fear and excitement. My factor is also marked by a repetition compulsion (Freud). It is that aspect of my signature that repeatedly emerges

beyond what I consciously reveal or hide concerning my desires, and in spite of my conscious configuration of materialities.

Making art, therefore, involves two kinds of repetition. I want to show myself, to sign. Gómez-Peña (2001) accurately speaks of the melancholic oppression of solipsistic insulation against which performative self-expression is a need. It is less that I want to be something, and not nothing, although it is that too. More pointedly, I create artworks in response to the desire for significance. I want to show, even if this is only to show myself up in my human frailty or pretensions, or to show that I understand the absurdity of my self-showing. In my signature a desire that cannot become meaningful without destroying me is already negatively inscribed as my “factor”, as the abjected Real in me that resists the phenomenal showing. Speaking of performance art, the serendipitous scarring of my body might become the object “a” that indicates this traumatic Real, whereas my deliberate styling represents my signature. “Our scars are involuntary words in the open book of our body, whereas our tattoos, piercings, body paint, adornments, performance prosthetics, and/or robotic accessories, are de-li-be-rate phrases” (Gómez-Peña 2001).

Art in which the abjected Real is negatively encrypted in the object “a” exceeds intentional meaning making or self-expression. There is something to be said for the idea that such art emerges “from the zone” so to speak. When I am in the zone, it is said, “I lose myself” and the game or the music plays itself, or the words write themselves, through me. I am reminded that “being in the flow” is another good expression for this state. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes “flow” as a state of elated psychic energy generated when a person’s attention is focussed on a difficult but worthwhile activity that stretches the mind or body to its limits. In his words, flow is

a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity... people typically feel strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities. Both a sense of time and emotional problems seem to disappear, and there is an exhilarating feeling of transcendence.

Interestingly, as Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2009: 90) point out, the state of flow is associated with a sense of both self-loss (“loss of reflective self-consciousness”) and effortless control (“a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next”). This apparent inconsistency disappears, however, if one understands that the sense of self-loss occurs when the ego as critical agent is eclipsed by absorbed attention to the task at hand and the unconscious is freed to play for a while. On the dark side, it is also precisely when I am not consciously trying to control and form the work that my factor is inscribed in it unconsciously as an object “a”. The unconscious, while it might condense and displace and encrypt, never lies. It is always the conscious agent who lies and distorts. As Maleuvre (2006: 284) remarks: A conscious effort “to present yourself via a work is never free of window dressing, self vindication. Even if you present yourself ostensibly warts and all, you manipulate the truth. To pretend to be too honest is inauthentic – a pretense to be superhumanly above and aware of all your foibles”. It is, in fact, this kind of pretence that marks utter self-abandonment. By contrast, the self-loss associated with being in the zone is not at all self-abandonment, but the deepest possible level of self-revelation. When I am in the zone, I am pulled out of myself and thrown into an encounter with the traumatic Real in myself. For the uncanny spell of orgasmic jouissance, the “I” who actively makes art dissolves, the meaning of my being is negated, I am not at home with myself, and there is only the being who suffers the passion. This trauma is inscribed in the configuration of the work that emerges. The critical self may later ask: “Did I really write this or paint this? Where did this stuff come from?” “Is



it exciting or horrific?” In response to it I feel the ambivalent mix associated with dread: deep satisfaction and excitement (I want to show this) and a shock of surprise or disgust (I want to hide this). It takes courage to show work that emerges from the zone because it reveals a deep truth about an artist’s being and/or abyssal non-being by showing what cannot be part of empathic communion, but is instead associated with desire.

Art that emerges from the zone is always self-transcending, but transcendence negotiates the fine line between the economic dynamic of self-edification and aneconomic dissolution. As self-edification, art-making (*pace* Plato) responds to the force of Eros, which is famously described in Plato’s *Symposium* as the progeny of Poverty (dissatisfaction) and Resourcefulness (creativity). The true lover, articulated by “Diotima” and embodied by Socrates, is the one who recognises in his very humanity an ardent pursuit of a “better self”, whose sensible representation is beauty, and whose attainment is happiness. Although we recognise that love is a passion for the impossible, if we did not nevertheless desire it, we would be reduced to merely animal instincts. Love in the name of self-edification is the source of the joyful excitement that moves us to make art. If the economy of formative transcendence were all there was, through my art works, my body works and my love machines, I would gradually build up a richly detailed semblance in which more and more of my inner being became visible.

Yet, particularly in contemporary western cultures, art and especially performance art claims the space and special freedoms allocated in every culture to the aneconomic figures of contestation and deviance; the court jester, shaman, scapegoat, pharmakos and so on (Gómez-Peña 2001). These figures, in the name of revivifying transcendence and cultural renewal, have tacit “permission to cross the dangerous borders of dreams, gender, madness, and witchcraft” and they act as “a constant reminder to society of the possibilities of other artistic, political, sexual or spiritual behaviors” (Gómez-Peña 2001). For some, the temporary moments of emancipation to be found in aneconomic self-dissolution dominates as a necessity. Such artists, identifying with “nomads, migrants, hybrids, and outcasts” find themselves pushing up against the imposed boundaries of identity. As Gómez-Peña (2001) puts it: “We are interstitial creatures and border citizens by nature – insiders/outsideers at the same time – and we rejoice in this paradoxical condition”.

### **Art as a love machine: A call for repetition in the other’s empathic response**

Another human is tacitly inscribed in art-making as the response to a desire for both economic and aneconomic self-transcendence. In principle, the self does not begin with itself. There is no such thing as an I shouting “I” alone in the world. The “I” is originally split in the sense that to say “I” is always already to have recognised the other. Firstly, I cannot perceive myself as “I” except through the response to me that comes from another. I am embodied as a perceptual or phenomenal “me” in relation to a three-fold other consisting of material objects in the world, the alter ego or other selves, and the symbolic other or social norms. Secondly, one may, without going into detail, take recourse to Hegel’s (1977: 111-119) dialectic of recognition. I cannot become human, he argues, without first recognising another human upon whom I call to recognise what I am and grant me my humanity by reciprocally treating me in accordance with the dignity due to another human: that is, eliminate me from the list of objects that can be devoured or used without thinking twice.

Because of this dialectical circularity of recognition, art is never one-sided self-creation. In fact, I would argue that in forming an artwork I present myself to another human as a declaration

of love. I am thinking of love in the Socratic tradition, which is also love in the Lacanian sense, whereby to love is to give what I do not have. When I say I love you, I have already recognised something in you that makes you the one worthy of recognising me. From my point of view, recognition from certain others has greater value or significance. Sometimes there is a singular you that I call upon for an empathic response. There is a factor in you that triggers my desire for your desire. Some of us love all humanity. Regardless of whether it is directed to a single or universal other, art as love remains a call for empathic reciprocal recognition or communion.

In giving myself to you, I give you my desire for your desire. The dynamic of self-transcendence in art may be thought of as the lover's material investment of the self in a work that calls for empathic return. Through such investment, I want to show my vision as a mirroring reflection in which others may recognise themselves and equally suffer the self-transformative process. In response to this empathic response, in response to how I am seen by you, I verify and adjust my vision and I am re-shaped. If you love me or smash me up, my visibility registers this in the way I move around or speak, and you are re-shaped accordingly. I am reminded that the necessary, multiple, and terrible, risks inscribed in such interactivity are made hauntingly conspicuous in Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, 1974. To potentially expose the factor of your desire for the other's response is risky enough, but Abramović pushed this dynamic to its dreadful limit. She did not present the other with an excitingly mysterious factor, but with an intolerable enigma; a factorless, non-desiring being placed in a situation in which the question "what does she really want?" could be put to the test in 72 different ways. In this performance work, she undertook to remain passive and impassive for six hours, inviting an audience to engage with her body if they wished to, using any of 72 objects placed on a table nearby. The frustration of modest attempts to fathom her desire by eliciting some form of response engendered in the acts of some audience members increasing violation and cruelty. Her unbearable refusal to offer any empathic response freed the other, chillingly, to give expression to his or her own ugly factor. While I in no way condone it, one may at least understand this vicious aggressivity as a response to the terrifying threat of annihilation posed by the one who will not offer recognition. To save themselves from nothingness, they would go so far as to destroy the object of their desire. In Abramović's words, after the event, "What I learned was that... if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you" (Daneri, et al 2002: 29).

Notably, while both aim for life-changing self-transcendence, one may discover the difference between political activism and art precisely in a strategic difference between communication as persuasion and as a declaration of love which calls for an empathic response. Gómez-Peña (2001) highlights this erotic circulation between artist and audience.

The performance always begins in our skin and muscles, projects itself onto the social sphere, and returns via our psyche, back to our body and into our blood stream; only to be refracted back onto the social world via documentation... Whether conscious or not, deep inside we truly believe that what we do actually changes people's lives, and we have a real hard time being cool about it. Performance is a matter of life or death to us.

This economy of investment and empathic return is repeated and highlighted when my self-transcendence as materialisation is elaborated to reach a beloved who is not physically proximate. Artworks are created as the prosthetics of embodiment, other bodies or love-machines that inscribe my signature and my factor. For example, when I write a love letter, I (not necessarily consciously) materialise my signature and my factor in another body (a body of writing). My works take me beyond myself in the sense that they are the materialisation of subjective invisibilities in the hope of reaching/touching the other at a distance. Most often addressed

by the work in the artist's absence, the other's response takes shape isomorphically as either edifying communion or the traumatic shock of dissolution.

Recall that Plato's true lover remains in ardent pursuit of a "better self". The beloved audience to whom the work is presented serves the lover as a muse (an inspiration), or a stepping-stone (an educator) towards self-transcendence. A love relationship would ideally consist of a partnership of mutual elevation, entirely symmetrical in its give and take, between two "self-seekers" who gaze through the other's eyes to a beyond where the images of their better selves beckon them.

On the other hand, an artwork that inscribes the artist's "factor" behind an object "a" triggers not joyful empathic recognition of transcendent beauty, but addresses the other through triggering the other side of dread. Here, the struggle is not about edification but freedom. "Often our main struggle is precisely to escape our subjectivity—the imprisonment of our personal obsessions and solipsistic despair—and performance becomes the only way out" (Gómez-Peña 2001). An empathic response to this struggle in the other may not be affirmative. An effective work of art triggers perplexed self-reflection in the other: "the questions and dilemmas embodied in the images and rituals we present can continue to haunt the spectator's dreams, memories, and conversations" (Gómez-Peña 2001). I present my own ambiguities to others in the hope that they will recognise this of themselves or in their own bodies.

An empathic response to such work takes courage. As much as an artist may desire it, there might also be angry resistance to such recognition, particularly if the work emerges from a struggle between the desire to show and the desire to hide and the other sees past the masks and subterfuges to the object "a" that points to what I really want. Empathy means "I get it", but this understanding does not have to be affirmative. Addressed by the threat posed by recognising the object "a" in the work, the other, too, brushes up against the Real, glimpses the groundlessness of her own being and is filled with dread. The other's verifying recognition does not move her through admiring inspiration towards self-edification, but forces her to face the terrifying collapse of the fundamental fantasy that supports her own semblance. If empathy means brushing up against the Real, elevating communion is replaced by desire. In the encounter with the work, the other is pulled out of herself and opened to self-dissolution and the activation of desire. Like the artist in the zone, she becomes the being who suffers art's passion.

## **Art and Artifice**

I have argued that an artwork functions as a communicative love-machine through which I may both transcend my no-thingness and encounter its traumatic return, and in the showing of this play, I call out to others for an empathic response of communion or desire. On this understanding of art, the question arises of the grounds for a distinction between art and artifice. When is the production of such a communicative love-machine not art, but artifice? The question might be re-phrased as this: "when does art lie and when does it tell the truth?" Artifice occurs when the dynamic play of economic and aneconomic self-transcendence is arrested; when self-transcendence in either of its senses (as making the invisible visible or as dissolution of the visible to make way for the Real) stops in self-satisfaction. My art merely lies when instead of respecting the traumatic negativity of the Real in myself, I pretend to have achieved my own full presence in reality. My art also lies when it pretends to offer you the deepest, final, and absolute truth, leaving no room for mystery. But it is also artifice when I pretend to have nothing to say, no truth to offer, and produce works just to hide behind the orthodoxy of random assemblage.

Artifice stems from an absolute unwillingness to risk self-exposure. I create a semblance only to mask the Real, to blunt the anxiety and excitement associated with dread. My works become self-observant gestures in which I manufacture a highly controlled and repeatable signature. Yet, what makes a single artwork authentic is the singularity of the encounter with dread from which it emerged. Just as nobody can die for another, this encounter cannot be self-cited or mimicked by anyone else. What Gómez-Peña (2001) says about performance art holds for all art encounters: “no actor, robot, or virtual avatar can replace the singular spectacle of the body-in-action of the performance artist”. In the gesture of self-objectification, by contrast, I merely create protective artifice in which I lose my singularity to self-citation. Then I give this artificially manufactured subjectivity out only to be admired by carefully selected others who function as mirroring self-objects. Artifice stems from the self-enclosure of narcissism.

The difference between art and artifice has little to do with the medium or quality of the self-creative encounter. It has everything to do with courage: to resist the Real and create nevertheless; and to face dissolution when the ground falls away beneath your feet. Nietzsche sums our situation up exquisitely when he suggests via *Zarathustra* that the art of life and living art arises from the courage to “dance upon the abyss”.

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