

# Conceptual Art and Abstraction

## *Deconstructed Painting*

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a new conception of art and presents a form of painting that exemplifies that concept. Considering the developments in twentieth- and 21st-century art, the author notes that art created after the conceptual period has failed so far to take account of the profound transformation that occurred within it in the twentieth century. This change consisted in the identification of art with reality, achieved by incorporating into art all significant spheres/objects of reality. One result has been the dominance of referential art following the conceptualist period. Referential artworks are split into object and reference. This impedes untrammelled creativity, which would otherwise promote the integration of diverse formal elements. This article proposes painting that exemplifies such artistic creation.

Rather than a theoretical treatise on existing ideas, this article should be understood as an account of this author's self-conscious intuitions resulting from the contemplation of developments in art that inspired a conception of art and of painting exemplifying that conception. Those developments are outlined below.

Following the analytical art of the 1960s and 1970s (Conceptualism) came the postmodernist turn and a loss of interest in deeper theoretical investigations. Artistic consciousness, which had such a key role before and in the era of Conceptualism, became less important. The use of new media to describe reality, communicate content (e.g. social content) or express emotions, reflecting largely the contribution of Joseph Beuys and Neo-Expressionism, was effected superficially, without taking into account a significant change brought by twentieth-century art (including Conceptualism), which consisted in the identification of art with reality and of content with the formal element. While content was now given a greater role as a formal tool, it was also treated (in its referential aspect) in a traditional manner, as external to art, despite the fact that twentieth-century art had sought

to include in its remit all things extra-artistic, thus implying that art can be everything (every object). As Grzegorz Dziamski noted, following Boris Groys:

Today everything may be art; everything may function as art, because art has liberated itself of all constraints, including the constraints of its own definition, and gained absolute freedom. Art became absolute, as Boris Groys says. It became absolute because it made anti-art a fully legitimate part of itself, and from that moment on, from the time anti-art was incorporated in the realm of art, it is not possible to either undermine or negate art, because even negation of art is art, as attested moreover by a long, almost century-old tradition, going as far back as the first readymades of Marcel Duchamp [1].

Conceptualism completed the process of absorbing reality into art by including, in addition to material spheres (incorporated by earlier trends), such as the earth and the body, the creative process and even life, as well as thought, content and its referent [2]. Parallel to those changes, consciousness was altered, e.g. by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, consisting of an internal reconstruction of familiar formal structures of meaning. The result is that when reality is considered in the context of art, art can be understood as reality itself rather than something existing alongside reality. There is also a psychological aspect related to that process: The artistic personality perceives reality precisely as art (for example, in actions identifying life with art).

The consequences of identifying art with reality go further. Today, when examining any object (of reality) in the context of art (as an artwork), it is necessary to recognize that such context comprises its entire reality (as art). Consequently, any reference/meaning of the artwork also belongs to that context (which means that it is a formal artistic element), and since it is linked to the artwork it also forms part of its formal tools. Hence, the postconceptualist period presents new types of formal elements, representing a synthesis of the formal element that existed before Conceptualism and its (then) meaning/reference (assuming no significant change in

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meanings in relation to the past). Such formal elements no longer have any external meaning/reference (since they have been internalized) relating to reality conceived as existing outside art. On the other hand, as a result of the equation of art with reality, the former has no longer any contact with the latter, and today we can deal either with art or with reality, depending on which of these two dimensions we choose to be active in. By treating any object of reality as a formal element of art, we also turn all other objects of reality into formal objects of art, because for a given object to remain a formal element of art it must be considered exclusively within the context of art. Therefore, any relationships between individual formal elements can only operate within the realm of art (as with relationships with the other formal elements).

This view of art brings to mind the abstract art of the early twentieth century, the essential aim of which was to shed its relations with reality. In *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Alfred Barr explained the meaning of the word *abstraction* as follows: “The verb to *abstract* means to *draw out of* or *away from*. But the noun *abstraction* is something already drawn out of or away from—so much so that like a geometrical figure or an amorphous silhouette it may have no apparent relation to concrete reality” [3].

Today, we also confront the severance of links between art and reality, albeit in a different way than in the case of geometric abstraction. Thus, in line with the above-cited definition, formal elements of art freed from any relationship with reality can be regarded as abstract, and the use of such elements may be described as “abstract art.” The failure to take account of the identification of art with reality is attested by the referential nature of contemporary art, as well as by the

views of art theorists who believe that only such art is possible. For example, Arthur Danto in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* stated that each artwork is (must be) about something, that it is a type of statement about reality [4].

The referential nature (or commitment) of art introduces a division of the artwork into object and reference (meaning, content), differentiating the reference as a formal element external to the work (a meta-element). That distinction is all the stronger because the reference is a special (not visual) kind of formal element. Such division of the artwork is not conducive to unfettered creativity, which consists in the integration of any number of diverse (but nevertheless equal for creative purposes) formal elements.

For instance, in Wilhelm Sasnal’s *Untitled* (2009), a painting depicting tires on a beach, the object is the painting, while the reference is, for example, environmentalism. Instead of entering into play with other formal elements of the painting such as colors, shapes, arrangement, etc., the reference (as a formal element) constitutes another and separate part of the work (to which the former elements are subordinated). In contrast, in such paintings as my *Last Supper* (Fig. 1) or *Group of People* (Fig. 2), formal elements are much less constrained and treated equally.

If we agree that the referential nature of art is in line with the reigning paradigm (discernible to a lesser or greater extent in all works presented at major exhibitions such as *documenta* in Kassel or the *Venice Biennale*), one should consider that this formula blocks unfettered creativity and artistic expression. Jan Verwoert expressed a similar concern [5], discussing the need to conceptualize painting by reaching deeper into painting itself, its language, formal structure and history, in contrast to the current practice (conceptualiza-



**Fig. 1.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Last Supper*, acrylic, photos, ink, charcoal, gold paint on canvas, 90 × 170 cm, 1986/2002. (© Mariusz Stanowski) Formal elements include: quotation, expression, geometry, realism, Cubism, drawing, photography, charcoal, gold, color, negative, complexity, poor visibility, multiplicity, perspective.



**Fig. 2.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Group of People*, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 140 cm, 2001. (© Mariusz Stanowski) Formal elements include: portraits (famous people representing different spheres of life), color, quotation, eroticism, directionality, drawing.

tion), which merely positions painting as one of the available media (committed to the expression of some content, e.g. social content).

As an analogy of such painting, I would point to socially engaged painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (e.g. the paintings of Jacques-Louis David). At that time, such art was criticized by supporters of autonomous art because it neglected artistic values by serving some ideology. Yet, ideology could not be integral to an artwork in the past to the extent it can be at present. This is because today the reference (meaning, content) can play the same role as other formal means, such as color (Figs 1–7), shape, space (Figs 1,5), photo (Figs 1,3,8), quotation (Figs 1,2,4–8), etc., without disturbing the integrity of the artwork. Such a solution is indispensable given the long record of art’s commitment to ideology (originated largely by Beuys) and the noticeable dearth and need for autonomous art as evidenced by, for instance, the title (*Viva Arte Viva*) and program of the 2017 *Venice Biennale*.



**Fig. 3.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Self-Portrait 2*, acrylic, photos on canvas, 100 × 70 cm, 2010. (© Mariusz Stanowski) The intersecting lines formed from portraits (of the author) have the following formal characteristics: color, photography, direction, negative, brightness, differentiation. The elements at the intersections overlap. This may symbolize the way we think, or the nervous system in the brain.



**Fig. 4.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Jazz Group*, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 140 cm, 2018. (© Mariusz Stanowski) Formal elements include: content (a concert), color, quotation, drawing, double, nude. The main formal content (meaning) is a doubleness realized in many different ways.



**Fig. 5.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Viewpoint*, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 140 cm, 2018. (© Mariusz Stanowski) Formal elements include: content (popular tourist trap), perspective, color, quotation, transparency, double, size (sleeping Venus as a big cloud in the sky).



LEFT

**Fig. 6.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Birds*, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, 2019. (© Mariusz Stanowski)

Formal elements include: quotation (Mondrian), drawing, size, portraits (of famous composers). The formal content of this painting consists in the combination of three different spheres of reality: modern visual art (Mondrian), classical music (famous composers) and nature (birds).

BELOW LEFT

**Fig. 7.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Three Graces*, acrylic on canvas, 140 × 110 cm, 2018. (© Mariusz Stanowski) Formal elements include: quotation, drawing, color, eroticism, geometry, transparency, multiplicity, painting style, negative, race, content (during the photo session the woman on the right receives a message).

BELOW

**Fig. 8.** Mariusz Stanowski, *Mona Lisa*, photos on canvas, 100 × 70 cm, 2001. (© Mariusz Stanowski) Portrait of Mona Lisa made from tiny photos of pop star Madonna, stuck to the canvas. Formal elements include: quotation, drawing, photographs, size, multiplicity.



## HOW THE CHANGE MAY BE EFFECTED: AN EXAMPLE

Here I describe my own painting (which I have been pursuing since 1986) as an example of abstract art conforming to the interpretation of abstraction outlined above.

The formal elements of my paintings are the familiar formal elements of art, that is, those that became differentiated (achieved autonomy) in the course of the history of art (primarily in the twentieth century). Because they are already differentiated and known (equipped with meanings attributed to them), they should be treated as new formal elements representing the synthesis of the form (visual/material element) and its meaning. I have described such painting as *pure* because it also employs formal elements devoid of referents (since referents/meanings have been inducted into formal elements), or pure forms. I discussed this in a 1986 manifesto:

Crisis of Art as Art: If we equate the crisis of art with the exhaustion of formal means of expression, that is if we agree that each structure of reality has already been a formal means, then this is a very positive development. The art that we currently practice is purer than ever before. At present, when all elements of reality may be considered formal elements, in engaging in artistic activity we deal exclusively with formal elements, or pure forms. In the process of creation, new pure forms are born out of pure forms; therefore, the creativity itself is a pure form—art. If this is so, then we must not invent new formal means, but on the contrary we need to take advantage of those already available. The more they are known, the purer such forms become [6].

Examples of new formal elements are listed in the text *Pure Painting—Interpretation* [7]:

The object of *Pure Painting* is the whole existing painting, just as reality is the object of existing painting. I consider the existing painting to be much wider than a collection of existing artworks, i.e. I consider it as all formal elements to be eligible for specific types, directions and styles of painting which in fact could represent all spheres of reality (it has become possible due to the expansion of painting in [the] 20th century).

Pure painting can be a synthesis of any existing formal elements. First of all, however, it tries to set together the most known elements, i.e. those that are most prominent in the whole area of painting. Here are some examples of them:

A) formal elements distinguished by particular directions in painting.

- color—most strongly distinguished by impressionism.
- space, visual organization—by Cubism.
- geometrical forms, structures—by Geometric Abstraction.
- object—by Pop-Art.
- gesture—Abstract Expressionism.
- objective references—Surrealism.
- visual structures related to physiology of vision—by Op-Art.

B) formal elements distinguished by individual artists:

- color blue, gold—Yves Klein.
- line—Piero Manzoni.

C) workshop-related structures:

- sketches, projects, notes.
- text—On Kawara.
- graphic techniques, drawing (pencil, charcoal, ink), watercolor, oil, acrylic, photography.

D) abstract elements:

- inverted, exact, complex, large, small, double, colored, unfinished, multiple.

E) From the point of view of the whole area of painting, the formal elements are both elements in different types, directions, styles as well as whole directions, types, styles that are distinguishable and visually recognizable, even in small fragments of images. These are more complex elements, covering wider formal areas, and qualitatively different from the elements themselves, i.e. elements of particular directions, types, styles of existing painting.

Here we can include:

- styles of individual epochs, e.g. Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque.
- styles of particular directions, e.g. Impressionism, Realism, Cubism.
- styles of individual painters and quotations, e.g. Joan Miro, Victor Vasarely.

F) various types of painting, e.g. Primitive Painting, Child Painting, Egyptian Painting, Graffiti.

What the Pure Painting is:

- Pure Painting is a tautology because it only refers to painting.
- Pure Painting uses familiar, existing formal languages—in this sense Pure Painting is a metalanguage.
- Pure Painting is a pure form. Elements of Pure Painting are obtained by selecting specific structures of the existing painting. Selected structures/elements detached from their own context and placed in the context of Pure Painting lose their previous (utility) functions, like Ready-Made elements in the context of art.
- Pure Painting is the most abstract painting because it abstracts formal elements in a broader sense than abstracting from objectivity as existing abstract painting does. Pure painting also treats a specific object as a form abstracted from the context of objectivity in existing painting and representing this context (as a meaning) in Pure Painting, likewise treats abstract elements, e.g. geometric forms.
- Pure Painting associating pure formal elements (visual part of existing formal elements together with their meanings, references, content) is a pure creativity.
- Pure Painting is the result of not related to anything specific, an abstract necessity of creation.

The idea of Pure Painting is founded on the assumption that all more important formal elements of painting are already known (and represent, in a sense, ready-made objects). Pictures are created here by choosing any formal element, e.g. portrait, and *rebuilding* it using other (known) formal elements such as color, photography, direction, negative, brightness, etc.

This method resembles Derrida's deconstruction. The

analogy is useful here because all formal elements (like words in a text) have meanings ascribed to them. For instance, in *Last Supper* (Fig. 1), the quotation (of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*) has been subjected to deconstruction. The meanings associated with the visual formal elements include: quotation (of a well-known painting), expression (first man on the left), charcoal (a group of three people on the left side of Christ), photography (legs), sculpture (third man on the left), Cubism (third man on the right), perspective (white lines), etc. Each formal element may be both constitutive and deconstructed; all formal elements in pure painting are treated equally. The conception proposed here does not rule out the possibility of using (temporal) context to represent similar solutions, such as Neo-Expressionism or socially committed art. However, it treats them as individual formal elements (types of ready-made objects) employed to express an idea or metaphor. Moreover, it offers an alternative that puts these ready-made objects to use as material for creating complex structures, thus restoring the possibility of composing (building)—as in music or Cubism, but on a higher (meta) level.

To further clarify the essence of this concept of art, it is helpful to describe its references. These references are general and as such testify to the autonomy of the paintings introduced here rather than to their referential nature:

1. When viewing the paintings (Figs 1–8) made in line with the proposed conception, we notice that the associated formal elements become differentiated (identifiable) and the creative process is conscious and perceptible. This is how painting communicates the idea of creation (being a metaphor and an expression of creation). This point is discussed in the following fragment of a larger text titled *Creation and Expression of Creation*:

“I paint in such a way as to reveal the process of combining the formal elements. It seems to me that especially in the case of painting, where the creative process tends to be concealed, it could be stimulating to bring that process into the open. In my view, creativity is the deepest motivation for all activity today, as well as a

necessity, regardless of whether our activity is truly innovative or only limited to mere subjective expression. When I realized that rather than tracing my own path, my work would have to follow one of the roads already traveled, I experienced it as a drama of the inability to attain self-fulfillment in our times. Later on, it occurred to me that instead of creating anything I can express the idea of artistic creation itself [8].”

As examples of the disclosure of the creative process I should mention the paintings of Picasso and Arcimboldo, wherein the building and creation are most visible.

2. This form of painting represents the very definition of painting, because it defines all formal elements of painting. If we agree that all formal elements of art are also (in a sense) the formal elements of painting, the latter can also be regarded as the definition of *art*, as well as the definition/model of *reality* (in accordance with the idea that art superimposes itself on reality). I understand the painting of Mondrian, where painting is defined as vertical and horizontal direction and basic colors (black, white and gray), along similar lines. The model character of Mondrian's painting was noticed by many theoreticians, e.g. Y.-A. Bois in *Painting as Model* [9].

One can tell a great deal about painting from a name/label. At first, I described my painting work as *pure*. Such designation seemed the most appropriate, but its association with purism in painting was uncalled for. Thus, I later began to use the term *conceptual* painting, since concepts were its most critical formal elements. That painting work represented, in my view, a synthesis of traditional painting and Conceptualism. However, that name subsequently became associated with a trend in painting, which to me had little to do with Conceptualism. The third label I considered for reasons outlined above was *abstract* painting. However, that term already refers to abstract painting of the early twentieth century. Presently I am thinking about choosing the designation *deconstructed* painting, which has been kindly suggested to me, probably because it is a new term in the field of painting and says a lot about the concept of painting presented in this article.

## References and Notes

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