

a journal of art and anti-art

shy plumber

2020

issue 1

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## EDITORIAL

Shy Plumber is for those who are interested in art. However, it has nothing to do with art criticism and cultural news (there will be nothing about culture, although, perhaps, we will publish some *nothing* about culture). In other words, this is for those who are interested in art not "in connection with ... [anything]", but in art as such, the concept of art, and that only secondarily in its particular empirical cases, as well as in the various kinds of intersections and relationships art has with other areas – culture, history, politics, economics, ecology, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, religion, mysticism, etc.

This doesn't mean, however, that this is just another aesthetic 'ivory tower': we are *not* interested in "expanding the domain of aesthetic", or "searching for the beautiful and the sublime", *nor aesthetics as such*. On the contrary, Shy Plumber is principally *counter-aesthetic* (not to be confused with 'anti-aestheticism' coined

by postmodernist cultural criticism): we understand artmaking as an intellectual operation "beyond the good or bad taste", that re-poses each time the question of its own essence. At the same time, we see the reflection on art and its concept as part of making art.

Therefore, Shy Plumber is made by artists and art theorists, but not by art critics, art historians, political scientists or cultural critics, although all of the above can also publish in our journal their texts if they are art theory. This, in its turn, determines the journal's format: you will not find here either positivistic connoisseurship, an archivist's obsession with an "undeservedly forgotten and underestimated things of the past", or reflections on how splendidly art "represents", "expresses", or "tells about something", as well as that that art 'researches' in something else, engaging with a presumably fruitful alliance with positive science, and the like.

Shy Plumber publishes two categories of material:

1) Texts in art theory (written by artists or professional theorists), as well as fragments of classic texts on art, which are of a certain significance for us;

2) Artworks, or it would be better to say, 'artistic ideas, realised in the graphic form'.

Poetry and prose published might be attributed, depending on its character, to either the first or the second category.

We consider publishing artworks to be fully analogous to showing them in a gallery or museum exhibition.

Shy Plumber prefers the materials that develop their own original ideas to those that reproduce trendy discourses or repeat someone else's thoughts.

However, sometimes we are going to repeat what you already know if we see that we should.

We publish only what we find suitable, according to our own stances and views.

Shy Plumber stands for environmentally responsible approaches, energy-saving methods, and recyclable materials in art production. We believe that if an A4 sheet of paper and a pen (or even a pdf) is enough to make an artistic idea implemented, it is unnecessary to make a gigantic resource-wasting piece out of it.

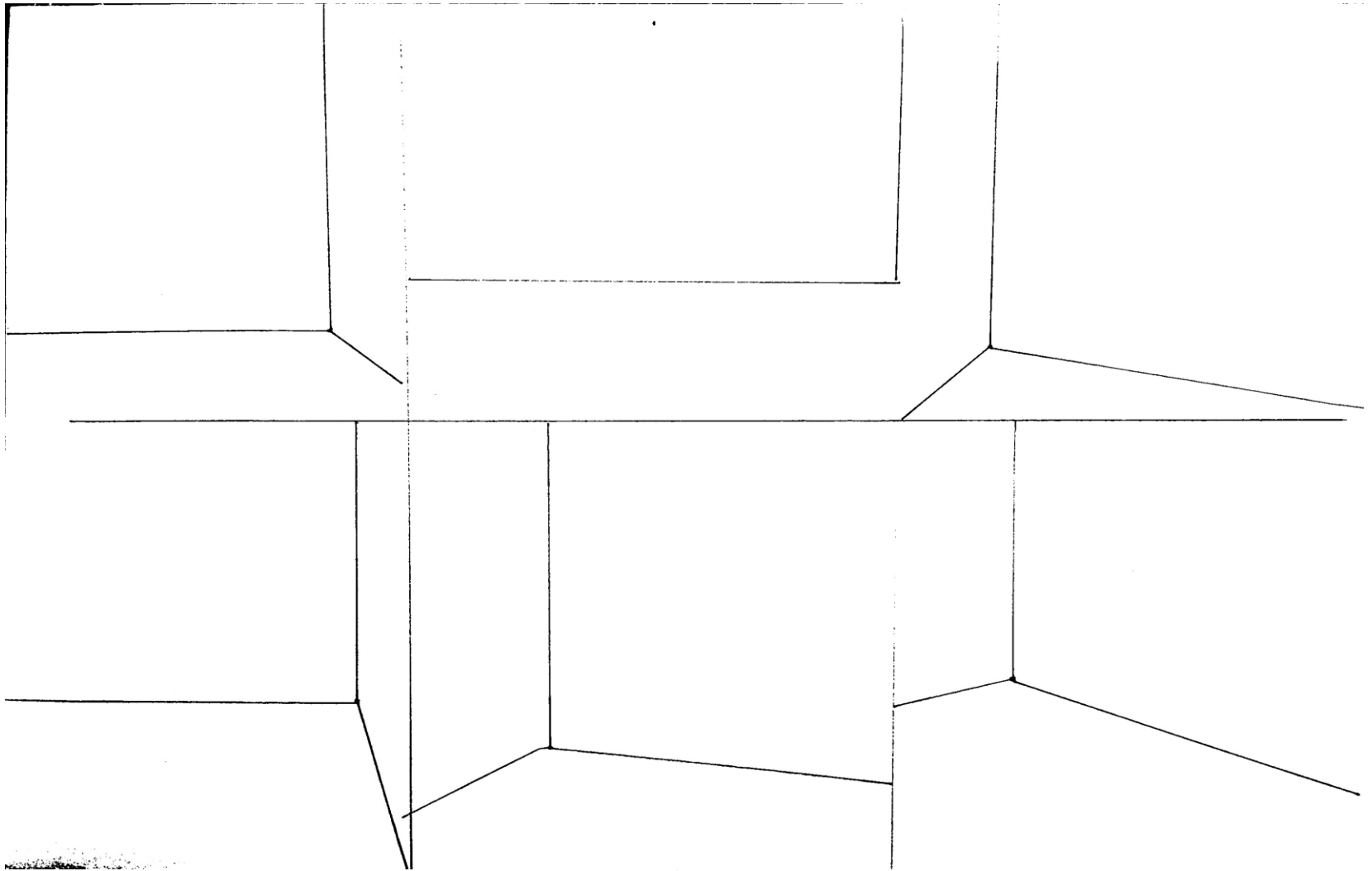
Shy Plumber strongly believes that any ideology of hatred or discrimination towards humans, as well as any ideas of violence or misconduct toward other living beings, is totally inappropriate in art, the same as in any other field.

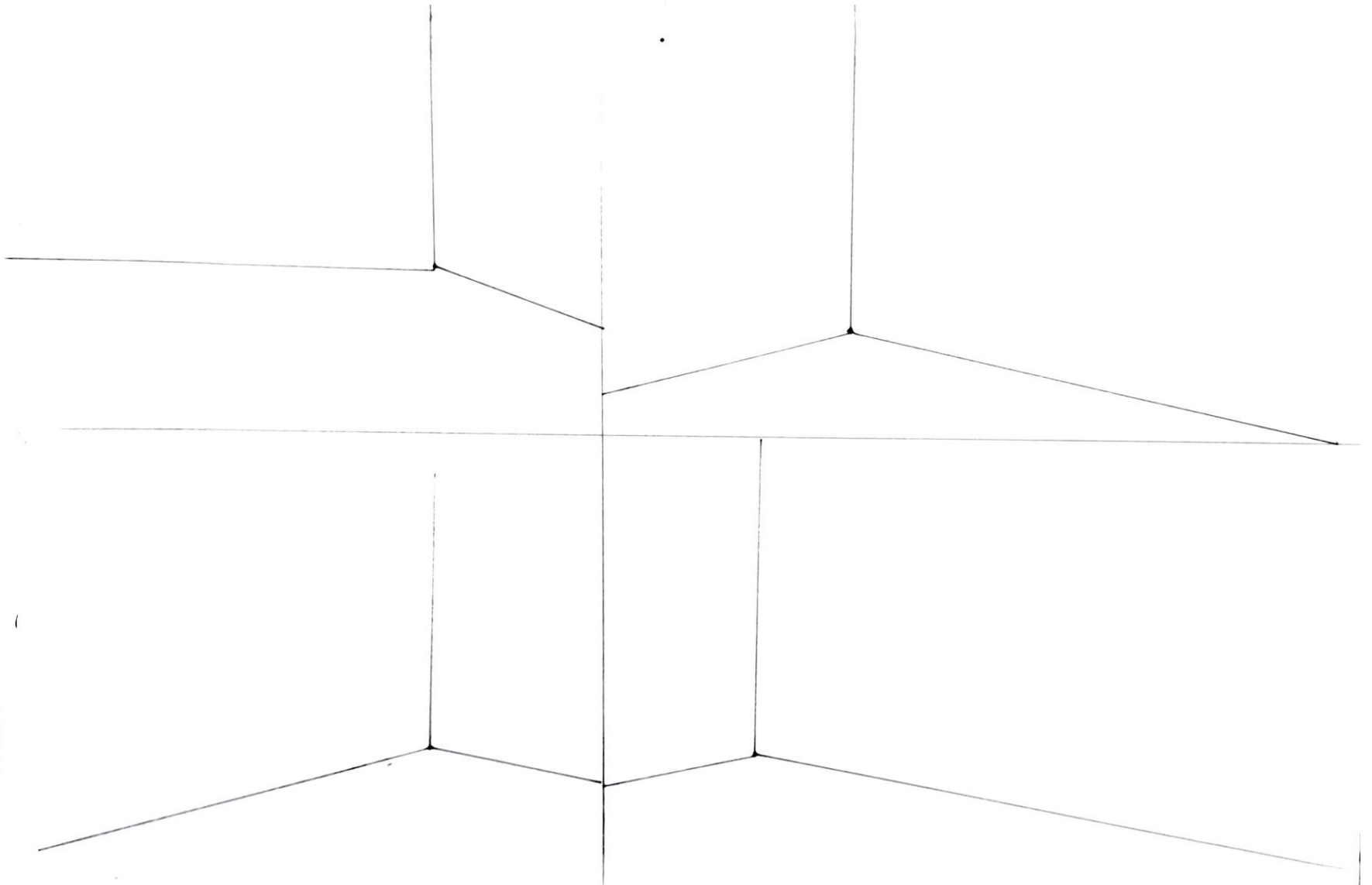
Shy Plumber doesn't represent the interests of any third parties, institutions or persons, and expresses only positions of itself (editorial board) and its authors, whose opinions are usually shared by the editorial board.

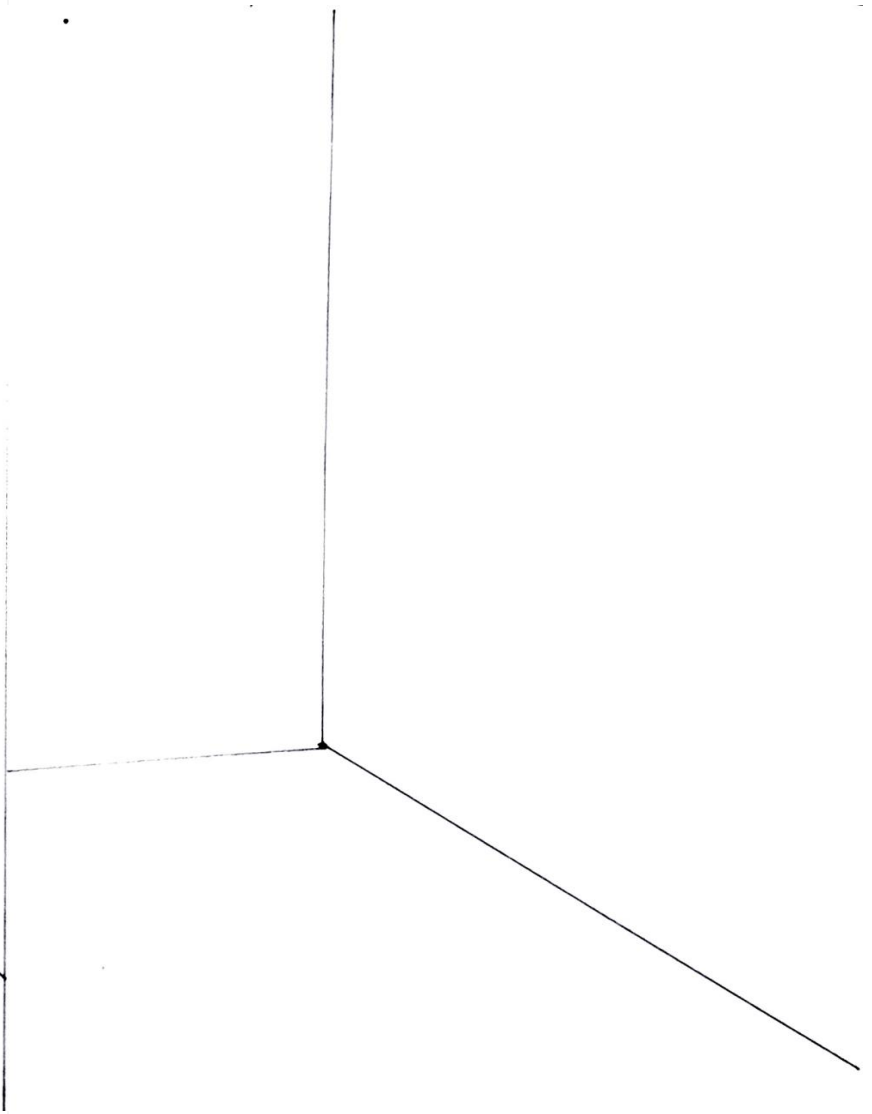
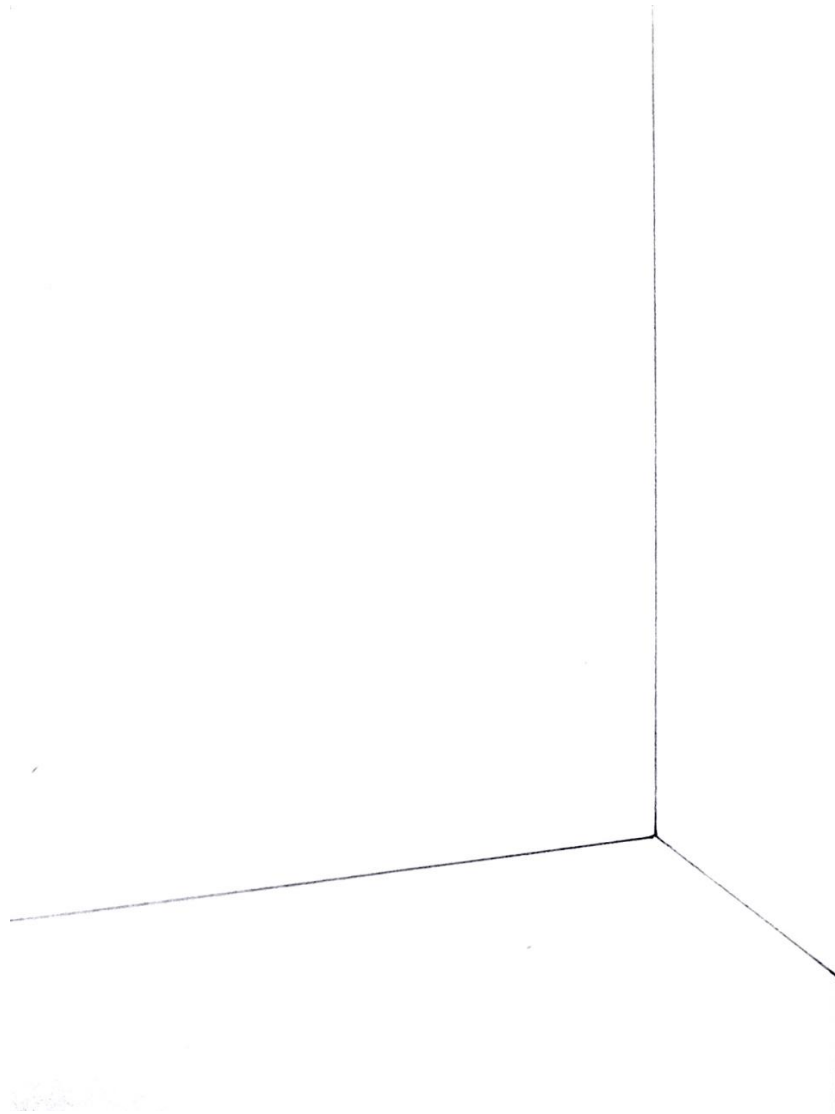
And last but not least. Shy Plumber is always on the artist's side.

## INAPPROPRIATE PROPOSITIONS

Genevieve Banana











## FRAGMENTS ON ART

Ilya Orlov

A work of art is a sensible (i.e. sensually perceived) form of idea. [...] But it is not sufficient to say that a work of art is idea embodied in a sensually perceivable form. For it is not that every thought realised in a sensible form is, automatically, a work of art. Therefore, 'idea' here means the idea of a special kind, that is, the idea built in a certain way. Such an idea can be designated as 'proposition', 'utterance', 'judgment', 'statement'. These words, of course, possess different shades of meaning, but in this context they are interchangeable; for example, when Foucault uses the term 'utterance' (Fr. *énonciation*), discussing the conceptual structure of Magritte's works, *énonciation* is close to the term 'proposition' as it used by A. J. Ayer and Joseph Kosuth.

But it also will not be sufficient to say that a work of art is a sensible form of such a special kind of idea ('proposition', 'utterance', 'énonciation'). Indeed, in this

definition, there is no indication of why and how, in a work of art, a thought turns into a sensible form. It also remains unclear what exactly is the peculiarity of the thought, that provides it with the opportunity to be *realised* in a work of art; more precisely, to *become* the latter; that is, what distinguishes it, in this case, from any other kind of thought. In other words, from this it is still not clear what exactly makes art being manufactured from this operation of the 'realisation' of thought.

The condition that would make the definition more complete is the following. The thought embodied in the sensually perceived form of a work is not just a 'proposition' ('utterance', 'énonciation'), but such a proposition that includes, as its integral, inseparable part, this sensible (sensually perceived) form *itself*, i.e. the very form of the work. In other words, a work of art is a statement that cannot be made without the participation of a

sensible form (regardless of what this form is – a material object exhibited, poem, physical gesture, event, or even a 'dematerialised' form).

The well-known maxim by the Moscow Conceptualist artist Vitaliy Komar that a work of conceptual art is a "work of art that can be told by telephone" does not mean at all that the sensible form (whether physical or 'dematerialised') is secondary or even extraneous to [conceptual] art. For, the fact that the work can be "told by telephone" does not cancel the form as the realisation of thought and does not turn idea into something that needs no form. The point is that what "can be told over the phone" is nothing else than a description of the sensible form, which can only be realised as an indivisible unity of the thought and its embodiment in a work of art – and this is the only way it can be told.

In other words, the art form is an integral part of the work of art, and how it is "told by

phone" is an aggregate of idea and form, regardless of whether a work of art has already been made physically or it exists only as a mutual fantasy of the author and his interlocutors. The condition of the inseparable unity of sensible form and thought in a work of art leads to the practical principle. The principle is that a work of art is such if the idea embodied in it cannot be realised otherwise than in this particular sensible form.

This principle can be formulated as a direction for practice: a work of art must be done in such a way that what it says could not be said otherwise than by creating such a work of art. For, a work of art does not make sense if it says exactly the same thing that can be expressed in another way even more clearly and directly; otherwise it would be a work that adds nothing to our understanding of the world and is not itself a valuable statement, i.e. a work that failed to become a work of art. This is

especially obvious if what was said to be a work of art could be expressed without losing meaning, by non-artistic means (for example, through an academic article, political statement, journalism, etc.).

[...]

This does not mean, however, that the artwork cannot discuss a subject or problem external to art; on the contrary, this is a common thing. A work, of course, can pose questions that are completely unrelated to art itself or to its ontology; but in this case, the answers are also not in the competence of art – and one should not expect or demand them from a work that posed them.

[...]

... a work of art is not a means to search for answers, but the answer itself. Not in the sense, of course, that a work of art is still capable or should, contrary to what has been said above, give answers to questions about objects external to art and its ontology, but in the sense that the work of art is an answer to

the outside world *within* the domain of art, but not beyond of it.

The domain of art, of course, is each time re-defined by the particular work of art (this constant redefinition is its innate characteristic and function, at least for the avant-garde and conceptual art), but the border between art and non-art, though changing constantly, keeps existing – as a condition of the possibility of art as such. To destroy the border would mean to abolish art *per se* (a similar task of a radical emancipation of art up to its complete merging with everyday life and production was set by the ambitious project of Production art of the early Soviet avant-garde, which remained incomplete).

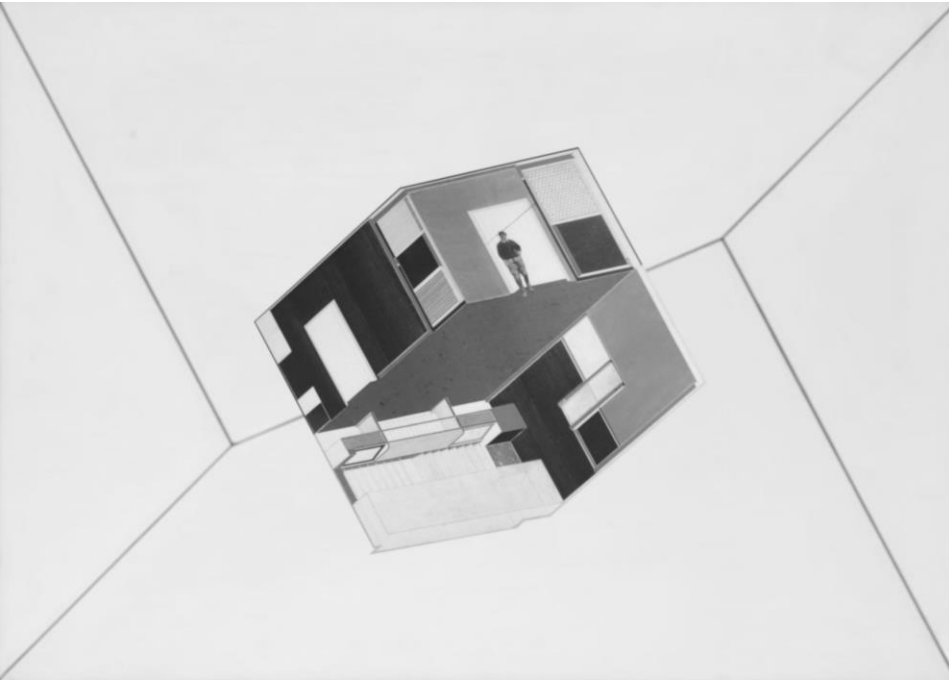
[...]

... art's claim for autonomy does not mean that a work of art, as in the 18th century or even as in the Aesthetic Movement of the late 19th century, is conceived as an 'aesthetic object'. This would be

a misconception. Here it is necessary to clarify the relation of contemporary art [if understood as the 'art after the avant-garde'] to aesthetics. (Perhaps, though, this issue requires constant clarifying and re-thinking, and the further discussion will show why it is so). The subject of contemporary art [in terms of the art after the avant-garde and conceptual art] cannot be considered within traditional aesthetics [more precisely, 'aesthetics' in terms of the late Kant and his "Critique of Judgment-Power"], since, starting from the avant-garde, the work is conceived and in fact built up as a challenge to the aesthetic, and that to aesthetics as a concept and doctrine.

ONE AND TWO ROOMS

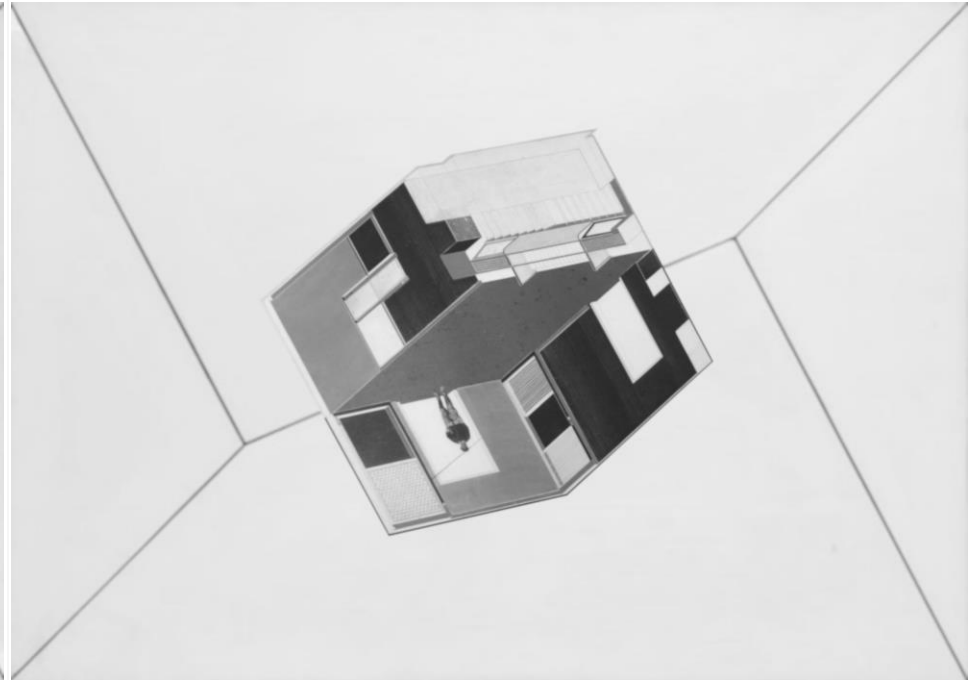
Basilisk Seahorseman



## COMMENTARY

I've been thinking of different kinds of 'propositions' – those that involve word and image, those that involve word and object, and those that were done a wordless way. The last type was definitely a natural one to Suprematism and Constructivism. I've been wondering whether it continued somehow in Conceptual art or not, and came to Lygia Clark's *Organic Lines*. Clark's things clearly inherit the avant-garde line of the Soviet 1920s, not at all superficially stylistically, but essentially as if picking up their Kantian

transcendental essence. I decided to take a further step, directly clash the characteristic image from the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s – Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinet* – with his Latin American successor to the late 1950s – Clark's *Organic Line*. Joined together, they turned out to be able to form a single mechanism producing an 'impossible space' that retains its quality when turned upside down. In other words, these two pictures published above are identical, one is just turned 180 degrees.



Interestingly, both Clark's and Lissitzky's utterances, despite being wordless, are not 'retinal', that is, they don't have to do with perception or visual 'aesthetic qualities' but are conceptual instead. This is exactly that "geometry [which] is never 'about' anything".

Apropos, one might remember Yve-Alain Bois's analysis of Lissitzky's works, that went further beyond Malevich's Suprematist model of space by introducing 'axometry' that operates with parallel lines only, so that it excludes perspective, and, by that, a

central role of a spectator, in which eye all the lines meet. Though, I think I found out something different there.

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Liisa Ahlfors

# ART - TAIDE - ИСКУССТВО

Zsusanna Starzsev

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## ON THE FUNCTION OF ART

Anton Chekhov

Letter to Aleksey Suvarin

Moscow,  
October 27, 1888.

English translation by  
Constance Garnett.

... In conversation with my literary colleagues I always insist that it is not the artist's business to solve problems that require a specialist's knowledge. It is a bad thing if a writer tackles a subject he does not understand. We have specialists for dealing with special questions: it is their business to judge of the commune, of the future of capitalism, of the evils of drunkenness, of boots, of the diseases of women. An artist must only judge of what he understands, his field is just as limited as that of any other specialist—I repeat this and insist on it always. That in his sphere there are no questions, but only answers, can only be maintained by those who have never written and have had no experience of thinking in images. An artist observes, selects, guesses,

combines—and this in itself presupposes a problem: unless he had set himself a problem from the very first there would be nothing to conjecture and nothing to select. To put it briefly, I will end by using the language of psychiatry: if one denies that creative work involves problems and purposes, one must admit that an artist creates without premeditation or intention, in a state of aberration; therefore, if an author boasted to me of having written a novel without a preconceived design, under a sudden inspiration, I should call him mad.

You are right in demanding that an artist should take an intelligent attitude to his work, but you confuse two things: *solving a problem* and *stating a problem correctly*. It is only the second that is obligatory for the artist. In "Anna Karenin" and "Evgeny Onegin" not a single problem is solved, but they satisfy you completely because all the problems are correctly stated in them. It is the business of the judge to put the right questions, but the answers must be given by the jury according to their own lights. [...]

## ART POSES QUESTIONS

Matthew Cowan

Berlin,  
June 1, 2020.

For most artists the question is not what, but how to present the ideas at the centre of their artistic inquiries. Anton Chekhov's assertion, written in 1888, that it is only "stating a problem correctly" that is the responsibility of the artist, shapes a way of looking at art practice that prioritises the pursuit of inquiry, rather than a regard for completed statements, answers and solutions.

Chekhov's claim predates by two years Oscar Wilde's assertion in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), that art is useless as it is a sterile object, not requiring action on the part of an audience. Wilde's plain-speaking note, outlined his claim that art should not be anything more than it is. The art object itself does not provide anything more than itself as object, it is in our response to it that the interest can begin. Appreciating it as something that could have application outside of the context of its aesthetic presentation is all contained in our response as an

audience, not in the artwork itself. Art cannot be functional in the way that tools are functional for example, its only 'use' for Wilde is to do with how it is perceived.

What might then be the usefulness of thinking about *art-as-uselessness* for an artist however? It might be that art operates in an unknowable zone, a place beyond a rational and linear understanding of sense, a place that art is the only medium usefully equipped to explore. This may mean that there are places and zones where every other mode of knowing is useless, except art. Art is at its best when dealing with unknowable or un-translatable things, in going through a process of communicating something that is *recognisably* unrecognisable. This process of presenting such unknowns must involve tests, questions and problems. The essential question for art then is, can an artwork contextualise such a thought or set of thoughts? Indeed, why not consider art as a domain of posing questions and constructing new problems – artistically.

R. G. Collingwood states in his *Principles of Art* (1938), that "art is



not indifferent to truth: it is essentially the pursuit of truth", identifying two kinds of artistic thinking, that of the expressive and that of the intellect. The intellect being the rational, scientific side, and the expressive the emotional side. In relation to truth, the intellectual argument can easily be defined in terms of logic and rational debate, but the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions of the expression of emotion are unable to be judged by such a framework. The tensions that exist between these two kinds of thinking are where problems and tensions arise, and consequently where a 'pursuit of truth' can unfold.

One key part of Collingwood's statement sticks out. That art is the pursuit of truth, rather than a statement of truth implies that truth itself might be artistically unknowable, or beyond the scope of ever being reached. He infers that art might be thought of as indifferent to truth because it deals with imagination and

representation, but distils the process of artmaking down to a quest for knowing. It might be that truth is not the only correct operative word here at all, an artist might substitute imagination, knowing, understanding or recognition into the same sentence, but the implication remains in the same sense as Chekhov has presented it. That is, that the statement of truth is not the job of an artist, as art's real concern is its pursuit.

Despite his appeal for artists to stick to their own specialisms, when we are reminded that Chekhov was a medical doctor as well as a writer, the context of his claim looks slightly different. He suggests that it is not advisable for an artist to step outside of their sphere of understanding, it is something that should be left to specialists of each particular field. He goes on to suggest that as artists our specialism is one of questioning, becoming specialists in observing, selecting, guessing, combining

and many other kinds of speculative presentations.

In *Technique for Writing Craft*, a guide for young writers by Viktor Shklovsky, published in 1927, we find the opposite advice. Shklovsky's guidance was that professional writers should *actually* have another profession in order to be able to produce a professional text, as writers. The perspective carried over from the other profession enhances the capacity of the writer to frame and contextualise their work. For Shklovsky this use of specialist knowledge as an artist, was a part of inventing a modern, ultra-democratic, post-revolutionary model of creative subjectivity.

But what if it is now the role, or even responsibility, of an artist to test their way of looking - by assuming the viewpoint of another field? This stepping out, assuming the practice of another vocation, is often a deliberate play by an artist to try to operate in blind, that is to operate in the field of

the unknown, since it is close to the field of the unknowable, in order to report back findings, to present field notes, or to offer documentary evidence - as art. This is not to say, of course, that the artist does not understand the process of what they are doing, rather that the technique of assuming the role of the specialist of another sphere - artistically - is specifically one role of an artist.

In *The artist as: producer, quarry, thread, director, writer, orchestrator, ethnographer, choreographer, poet, archivist, forger, curator, and many other things first* (2018), a text that looks at these practices, the term 'occupational drag' is suggested by the authors as one way of describing how today artists temporarily inhabit other roles and disciplines in their work. Many kinds of artistic practice result from this kind of repositioning of an artistic viewpoint. Artists seek out situations, where they are often artificially out of their depth, inexperienced, naïve or

untested in order to test the scope of their practice. In arranging these points of view reflectively, something new may emerge. Since Hal Foster's critique of artist's operative practices in *The Artist as Ethnographer* (1995), the practice of artists embracing another 'specialist's' role has only become more usual and developed. That is not to say that the practice steps away from that of being an artist however. The process of learning another viewpoint, as a pseudo version or an appropriated position, results in a particular artistic form of working method. The function of such practices is to shift the point of perspective and open up further artistic perspectives and processes of questioning.

'Problematizing' as a verb has become a term over the last decades to describe artistic practice whose currency is inherently that of critique. Does the artist critique the frameworks that they are working in? Is critique

embedded into the artwork itself through its production or its presentation? Art today has obligations to inherently present problems of the politics of its production, presentation and its economy.

Chekhov's consideration of the artist's responsibility, implores us to stay with the examination of the problem itself, rather than the solving of it. In Collingwood's two kinds of artistic thinking, mapping out two poles of a zone where logic and expression might endlessly compete, we can realise that there is much more to be gained from the pursuit of truth, than from its statement. Likewise, for an artist today, the usefulness of thinking about *art-as-uselessness*, can be in the construction of new problems and questions.

We are now at the point when one of the most common methods for an artist to do so, is to employ the disguise of another specialist, something Chekhov unreliably warned us against.

## ART HISTORY BACKWARDS

We cannot deal with art history the way art historians do, so we approach it conceptually. In this section of every issue of our journal, we publish one image of a historically significant piece of art that we will place upside down, mirrored, and as a negative. As the journal comes out every two months, in one year we will publish six pieces of art inverted.

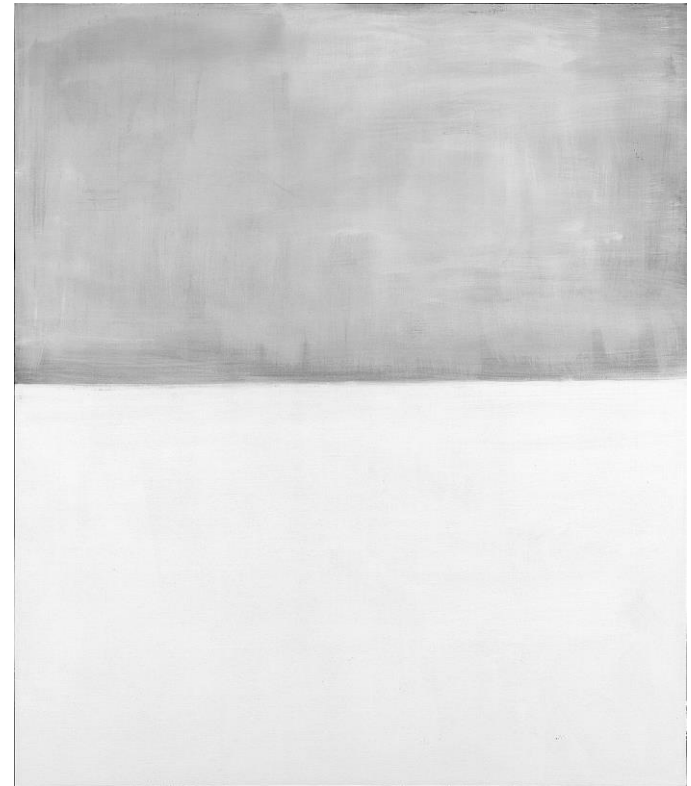
The concept for this section of our journal was sparked by the online publication of Led Zeppelin's albums played backwards "for those who believe Zep hid secret messages in their music". Though some commenters claimed they heard the word "Satan" several times, and others swore that there was something about Trump, we very much enjoyed listening to the reversed Led Zeppelin albums. It was especially striking how little change this manipulation has made on their sound - the general timbre of voice and guitars and immediately recognizable groove of the band remained pretty much the same. Though, yes, slightly more satanic

than the original. As for the reasons behind the idea of searching for hidden messages in 1970s rock music, it obviously was to do with the enormous transcendent impact such bands made on their listeners. People inevitably thought that the recordings contained some hidden, manipulative or even supernatural content.

Despite the fact that one might find such assumptions about the phantom power of rock music dubious, the eagerness to disclose the mechanisms of the power of art is what shapes our journal. This is why, inspired by this concept, we have decided to test some famous pieces of art using the same method of inversion. We hope that this brings us a better understanding of the reasons for popularity of particular pieces, as well as to disclose and uncover the hidden messages they contain.

Now we are thrilled to introduce you to the first piece in our collection:

Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Black and Grey)*, 1970.



SHY PLUMBER – ISSUE 1 – 2020

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