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This feeling has often been awakened in me before, but this was the first time I've found it written in somebody else's words. The point he makes is quite clear: this incredibly ingenious wall has a lot of philosophical and historical background. Kerr doesn't really seem to care whether it is art or not. He called it a possible artwork once, never art. Which maybe makes my point even more clear. He does this to emphasize the creativity and value of this wall that you could have just passed without giving it a second thought. Alex Kerr is a Japanologist and the first foreigner to receive a Shincho Gakugei Literature Prize for his book *Lost Japan*. Originally from the United States, Kerr lives in Japan where he is, apart from his writing, praised for his restorations of old buildings and collection of antiques. The book *Another Kyoto* is written to highlight hidden gems that Kerr found valuable; be it for aesthetical, historical or whatever other reasons, in and around Kyoto. (Kerr

“The High Stones wall of Shosei-en is first of all, of course, a wall, a big one proclaiming the prestige of Higashi-Honganji. At the same time, it's a self-conscious art work. One can imagine it appearing as an installation at a contemporary art museum, labeled *Destruction and Reconstruction #5*” -Alex Kerr (2018, p. 76-77)

(These walls were constructed using the remnants of the previous villa, destroyed by a disastrous fire. All the big rocks, pillars and grinding stones were used on the garden wall above, while the little, old tiles and rocks were on the outer wall.)

Let's start with Kintsugi. Kintsugi is an old technique of repairing broken ceramics, found mostly in Japan, with a gold lacquer. The essence of this technique is to embrace and even highlight these flaws, rather than simply hide them; to find beauty in irregularities.

My neighbor Theo, a talented potter, recently gave me a cup that I found extremely beautiful, or as I would rather like to call it: poetic. But as it goes, a few days later, I, in my small and crowded room, bumped it off the table with my backpack that was filled to the brim. I should have been more careful.

Deeply saddened by this, I spent a week or two looking at the broken shards, very much in anger with myself, - or rather disappointed. A friend of mine saw the shards and suggested teaching me how to repair the cup with the Kintsugi technique.

It was magical. The act of “visibly repairing”, was an act that transformed all these negative feelings into beauty. It didn’t erase the feelings; the golden lines are reminders. The cup gained history in its visual presence. If it wasn’t for the bad feelings before it’s physical state now, the cup wouldn’t be as special.

I dream of being able to find such a technique. But then, I’m an artist, would I call this art? This feeling, it’s all I ever want an artwork to be. Kintsugi isn’t viewed as art. It’s just a technique. But is it really? It contains philosophy, culture and technical craft, it could very well be an artwork. It has just never been conceived as an art in its own right. If someone would have invented this, in this day and age, it would be a copyrighted artwork. But kintsugi wasn’t made under the same ideas. It was created in a culture that was less individualistic, where the idea of ‘The Artist’ wasn’t so present. And so it remained to be simply a technique and maybe for the better. It became part of a culture. Multiple craftsmen started employing it and it spread out over the country during the coming decades. But do we know who first thought of it? Kintsugi is not a practice that has a home in the art world. It is part of everyday culture. Something an artwork can never attain in our current vision of art.

What I want to explore in this essay is the reasoning and relevance behind my search for a discourse to work in, separated from historical value assessments. Meaning that art created in the now, can only be valuable if it fits the formal succession of styles, tendencies, institutions, etcetera. A discourse that breaks free from a timeline and opens itself to different notions of artistic practices.

At the same time, it is about beauty, which should be interpreted as visually interesting instead of just pretty. Things that could be art but aren’t part of the art world or art history. The hidden gems you find on your everyday commute that catch your attention, about the object that your local carpenter made that you find yourself oh so attached to, the things you find in a historical museum rather than an art museum but even about things found in nature, not created by a human hand.

So why shouldn’t we view these things as art? The differences between a conventional art piece and this wall Kerr talks about are obvious. The wall has a function, it wasn’t made by an artist, it is not part of art history, it is rarely viewed in an artistic context, there is no white cube. Although some of these differences could make or break the term art, they don’t feel like sufficient reasons to me. The problem here seems to be how one must define the term art?

A Flight Of The Birds

As Wikipedia states it: “art is a diverse range of human activities, and resulting product, that involves creative or imaginative talent expressive of technical proficiency, beauty, emotional power or conceptual ideas.” (n.d.)

Under this definition, which is very broad, we could indeed call these things art, but we don't, or at least the people working in the field don't. I refer to the definition found on Wikipedia as a reminder of how the ordinary person will interpret the term. We must not forget that we are living in our bubble, the artworld. Wikipedia continues by saying that there is no agreed definition of art. But still to a lot of people it seems quite clear what is or what isn't art. And the higher we go in the specialization of the field of art and art history, less and less seems to be viewed as art. The term art is also a value judgement and that may be one of the most significant problems that art has. This, in combination with a vague definition and the abundance of different

Let's avoid the ambiguous term art for the moment and focus on art history.

Broadening The Banks Of The (Main)Stream

Although definitely useful and interesting, art history is a problematic term, and it has only become one in the last few centuries or so. Art history isn't inclusive yet and the question is, will it ever be?

“For Art History (the intellectual formation) to emerge, art qua art had to discover that it had a history (rather than being a timeless problem for philosophical aesthetics or academic standards).” (Pollock, 2014, p. 9-10)

Art history is even far from perfect from a non-globalized, solely western perspective. The lack of attention for female artists is still very much present. Hilma Af Klint has long been neglected throughout our past art discourse and it's still felt till this day. Klint was a pioneer in the exploration of the

interpretations makes it completely useless. There seem to be two versions, art and Art. But when does art become Art, and Art art?

Another definition is, art as something that mimics reality but by embodying an interpretation it can be discerned from the real. This definition can be found in the work of Griselda Pollock, Arthur Danto etcetera. Danto however argues in ‘The End of Art’ (1998) that art as we know it has ended by the mid 60's because one could no longer tell apart an artwork by looking (see Andy Warhol's Brillo box for example). What he says afterwards opens an interesting discussion. “An artwork, in this sense, embodies its meaning when it is seen interpretively. Anything, of course, can be seen as interpretively as long as one supposes it to embody a meaning... A flight of birds gets read as a sign from the gods until one stops believing in the gods, after which a flight of birds is a flight of birds.” (Danto, 1998, p. 130) Art after its end is, according to Danto, contemporary conceptual art. But what if there is another interpretation?

of the abstract in Western art, predating artists like Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondriaan. It was not that she wasn't heard of or seen in her time. In the 19th century she was one of the first female artists to study at the Academy of Stockholm. She wasn't unsuccessful either. But being one of the preeminent female painters, leading off in abstraction was a bit too much for critics so her abstract work never really saw the light of day. Kandinsky claimed being the initial abstract painter. Art history was written by men. Art history is only a selection. Of the hundred most cited creative thinkers (I do not say artists because the list also includes architects. I've never had architects be mentioned in my art history classes. This goes to show how undefined the term art and thus also artist is.), almost all are white, dead, European or North American, male painters. The sole exception being the few white, dead, European or North American, male architects. James Elkins uses this list as an example to show how art history is a single coherent enterprise because it remains focused on a selected canon of artists. He sees this unity as a positive, I get why. But this selection of artists is just outdated, where is Klint?

All this time later, it still seems challenging to rewrite this little part of art history. In classes she doesn't get the recognition she deserves, if she even gets mentioned. Griselda Pollock blames the Freudian theories of the theological (father idealization) and the narcissistic (hero idealization) as the reasons why the integration of diversity is going so awkwardly. (2014, p. 18) Pollock makes use of the term 'mainstream art history' and emphasizes the fact that there are multiple art histories. The problem with all art histories aside from the mainstream one is that these are often niche and thus short lived, they don't become part of the curriculum. So, when making use of the term 'art history' we are referring to mainstream (Western) art history.

is needed. (Mukherji, 2014, p.154)

Even in Europe, where this notion was invented, the term art was not used in the modern sense until the 18th century. By universalizing art, we are naming things under a term that wasn't even known by people during the process of making them. This risks re-creating societies by standards of the modern West. But how can they ever compare? There was never a place for them to fit in. Why should there have been? The notion of art and the ways of measuring its value reinforce colonialist perspectives. Art history was born out of European nationalism and has become redundant in our globalizing world. We also act like these cultures benefit from being acquainted with this concept while they function in a different way with different value systems. They have their own, different, notions of something art-like that could juxtapose that which we call art. (Dean, 2006, p. 26)

The Lega people of what we now call the Democratic Republic of the Congo, didn't have art, but they had masengo or put into translation, 'heavy things', these objects contain special powers for the Bwami, which makes them

The Problematic Of Primitive

When talking about 'Art' in different cultures, we immediately encounter a lot of problems. Many of these objects were not made as art and get grouped together by historians, art critics, etcetera as 'primitive art'. This term is problematic. First of all, with the use of the word primitive, the usage of primitive wants to show the superiority of Western Art. It immediately downgrades all other forms. Primitive means less, means before, means the past. While it should have meant different or unusual. The notion of Art as defined in Europe, and more specifically Western Europe, didn't exist in these societies before contact with Europe. During colonization Western art history spread throughout the world. Non-western variants of art quickly became subdued as Western culture established itself as the dominant or even elite form of artistic expression. Artifacts from non-Western cultures were viewed rather as objects of curiosity than of artistic significance. They may have been appreciated for their craft, creativity or beauty, but they were never incorporated in an art historical sense. A completely different context

exist apart from their usual objects. The Inca's had sacred rocks, which were sometimes carved, sometimes uncarved. The carved one's were more easily perceived as art because of their craftlike nature and because what was carved was often abstract, the West didn't find them as valuable. The uncarved ones were often neglected, totally misunderstood by Western art historians who couldn't comprehend how these could be valuable. The Australian aboriginals, a nomadic folk, have something called songlines. Because they are nomadic, they don't own a lot of objects, they would only be a burden on their treks. So why would they value 'Western art'? Their motives are to have the freedom to be poor just because they can. Owning these objects of value would be the opposite for them of how we perceive art. So, what do they value? They value nature, special things they pass on their paths. These 'things' range from rock formations to trees, to little streams of water, to the sheer emptiness of a view, landmarks so to say. They name them, for them they are holy. They can in no way be interpreted through Western ideas and compared to what we know as art. The world was sung into existence by holy spirits they call the Dreaming. These paths are songs,

which is for us a hard concept to grasp, but for them it makes total sense. These special locations on the songlines are checkpoints. Their whole society is based on a complex system making use of these checkpoints. They function as meeting points, as borders. Their function doesn't just stop at being 'Art'. With the Japanese it's easier. Their way of thinking about art resembles the Western way more but their aesthetic and philosophical standards are different. Which may lead to the same story of objects not being recognized for their autochthonous artistic value but because of the broader spectrum of artistic currents, there are more art-like objects to be found that resemble those Western notions more closely, thus ruling out the other tendencies. We should therefore make a clear understanding of the difference between 'art by appropriation', objects predating the introduction of the Western art theoretical discourse, not made with the idea of art in mind, and 'art by intention', art made with the intent of producing works of art. (Chatwin, 1988; Dean, 2006)

James Elkins gives in the introduction of his essay 'Is Art History Global?' five reasons why it is and why it isn't. The five affirmative reasons are complete nonsense. But he formulates them as such that they seem positive, I'll formulate them in a cruder manner.

1. If you want to write about art history, you shouldn't write about niche artists because no one will read this because they are niche for a reason.
2. Art history is not the same as art criticism, thus artists who are in the canon, although problematic, cannot be excluded.
3. Art history remains focused on white male painters.
4. Art history is guided by a stable series of narratives, outdated theories of white men.
5. (For this one I don't even have to reformulate anything)
Art history depends on Western conceptual schemata.

Rather than showing how it is global, these examples show everything what is wrong with art history in its current day and age in my opinion. I get where Elkins wants to go but these 5 reasons are so ambiguous or maybe

Then there is the problem of the use of the word art defined beforehand, in the beginning of this essay. There is no universal definition of what art is, it is the elephant in the room and it has been there for so long, it has grown so big, I think we are going to have to tear a wall down to get it out. A lot of objects made in other cultures are seen by some as art objects. Nonetheless they still don't hold the same value as, for example a more classical painting. Carolyn Dean's essay, 'The Trouble with (the Term) Art', is an exquisite introduction on this topic. Although what she has written, has inspired me loads, her conclusion doesn't cut it for me. She tries to conclude by going back to language, trying to define what the word art should or would want to mean and thus globalizing art history. But it stays theoretical, what I mean by this is trying to make people avoid errors when studying the past, while I'm more interested in what it could mean for the future.

even dubious. Elkins strives for all art historians around the world to be capable of understanding each other. But it bothers me that he sees no problem with discourse we're following. (Elkins, 2013)

Mukherji suggests in his essay 'Whither Art History?' (2014) that we should revolutionize Art history by doing case studies, not with the toolbox of twentieth-century Western European and North American Art history but rather with a local and regional vision. Because otherwise we would be, combining languages, terms and cultures and it would make one big cacophony of asymmetrical forms of knowledge leading to an asymmetry of interpretative efforts. This brings along discarding the overarching story of progression and canonization in the global history of art to incorporate non-Western art movements.

I can definitely see the gain in conceptual amplitude via this notion but I think it only works until a certain point before it grounds its own purpose. It does its job regarding the past and (pre)colonial state of art history, but for future endeavors, in the postcolonial world, there has been too much cross-fertilization between cultures to not have an overarching globalized view anymore. Very much visible in the works of immigrant artists, who dabble in both the culture of their 'home' country as well as the country they are living in. The combination of this 'in between' state has become a major topic in contemporary exhibitions. That's no surprise with the amount of attention migration is getting and how politically relevant the topic is. Nevertheless, I find that a lot of these exhibitions are about purely cultural differences and not challenging the conventional perspective of art. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing. This is absolutely not a must. It's quite an undertaking and I don't know if I, myself, would be up for the job. There have been quite a lot of revolutionary undertakings in art history but they always seem to stay inside this frame. The frame has unquestionably been expanded over the past centuries however it hasn't been broken.

We are now for the first time at a place where the discourse of what contemporary art is, the same is in every country due to colonial legacy followed by the ever-growing globalization. Just look at every contemporary art museum. Some may be better and more innovative than others but they are all built with the same principles and every country has one to try and show how artistically relevant they are. Although of late there have been more and more big institutions who are representing a broader spectrum of artists, these exhibitions often thread a fine line, some feel genuine and are great exhibitions. But others, due to the contemporary agenda for diversity, often makes it feel like they are being organized to be trendy, or to reach a quota. They market these as special or with an undertone of exotic interest, focusing on the artist rather than the work they produces. An exhibition, the context of these institutions and the concept of a museum are also part of this canon. When this is not the case (the works don't feel out of place) all seem to follow the same canon, the same principles of Western art history under which these institutions were established. Which sadly means that ultimately the Western view of living and therefore its vision of art, is the dominant

In 'Circulations in Global History of Art' (Kaufmann et al., 2016), this is seen as a self-solving problem. Because of globalization, art history will automatically broaden its views. I can't argue with this. Of course globalization will have an effect on art history but it will still follow the same basic principles. The aspiration of art has stayed with being non-physically functional objects, how much we may try to deny and deflect the statement that art has to be dis-functional, its intent is eminently an intellectual function. Although many have tried to change art's elite status, some more influential than others, none have been able to change art history for the better. Here too, we can see how different discourses have been lost due to art history only being a selection. Thus still, art has stayed disconnected from day to day life and lives in its ivory tower, looking down upon those who live on ground level.

dominant player on the scene.
And I don't think it's my favorite.

A clean slate is needed.

Art Or Artisan

It's no secret that the medium of painting is the most dominant and elitist form of art in art history. Still to this day painting is the stereotypical medium for art. This is no surprise. Paintings can only be used as paintings thus they are 'dis-functional'. Paintings can easily be moved, everybody has a wall in their home, so the art market prefers them because there is a big market for. But paintings weren't always the big players on the art scene. For a while tapestries were the thing to have for the rich bourgeoisie. The Romans were focused more on sculptures. And also, I haven't been nuanced enough, it wasn't just painting that was dominant, it was figurative painting to be more precise. In the last century abstract painting has made a huge gain in popularity but now it isn't the case of this or that, both styles of painting coexist. In pre-modern times this was absolutely not the case.

as the exemplary medium. The painter and the craftsmen were way more related, almost on the same level of status. The problem only started appearing when the painter as an artist started to be seen as a divine creator. Be it under religious ideas as being touched by God to create and communicate his ideas, Be it under more humanist ideas as a perpetrator of human excellence. And thus, making the artist stand on more autonomous footing in society.

There are multiple ways that men have tried to differentiate between the artist and the craftsmen. Historians Margot and Rudolf Wittkower (as cited in Sennet, 2009) saw the matter as such that art is unique or at least distinctive. Craft remains an anonymous, collective and continued practice. Art is based upon originality. Benvenuto Cellini, a famous goldsmith during the period of the Renaissance, distinguishes the two by three circumstances (as cited in Sennet, 2009): first there is agency: art has a singular guiding or dominant agent while craft has a collective. They are distinguished by time: the sudden versus the slow. And finally, by autonomy: the artist has no market, or only a very small one making him more endangered than the body of craftsmen.

In Western art the focus lay on conveying ideas through figurative scenes and the visual reproduction of reality.

It was not that abstraction didn't exist, but abstraction was mostly used in ornamental manners and consequently wasn't as highly praised. (Gertsman, 2021)

This brings me back to my statement that painting is dis-functional. This is a lie. The painterly practice, especially oil painting can only be used for painting, for all other graphic purposes this medium is inefficient and unpractical. Painting, like all other art forms, has a function. Although its function is not physical or straight forward communicational (like graphic design), it still has an intellectual function. I don't get why but it's almost a taboo to talk about this in the contemporary art world. To me a chair is as functional as a painting but just in a different way. If an object wouldn't have a function it would have quickly found its way to the trash. Why would I care about art, if it doesn't serve a purpose (and thus have no function). In the past this problem wasn't as present as it is nowadays. I'm going to keep using painting

Richard Sennett decimates these views by the use of Stradivari's workshop as an example in his wonderful book 'The Craftsmen' (2009). The common craftsmen's workshop works in a hierarchy. You have the master craftsman on top of the triangle and then you have his subordinates, the assistants and apprentices. The master craftsman is not only their employer, he is also their teacher. One day he will abandon his position but by then he will have trained one of his workers to take his place as master craftsman. It is estimated to take 10000 hours to become an expert in a trade, easily surpassed during the years spend during apprenticeship. In following the ideas of the Wittkower, an artist's workshop and practice die with him. The originality in his work only able to be reproduced by only himself. In some cases, copies of existing work could be made but they would be unable to further extend their artistic practices. Apart from this, with everything an apprentice would have learned, he would be able to create an artistic practice of his own but he cannot fully continue the legacy of his master. Compare this to a craftsman's workshop where knowledge gets past on from generation to generation because originality isn't a key factor. (as cited in Sennet, 2009)

Antonio Stradivari was a 17th century luthier, a craftsman of stringed instruments such as cello's, violins and etcetera. His work was and still is highly praised and some say the quality of his work is yet to be matched. Stradivari's career started the same as any other craftsman. He started as an apprentice in a master craftsman's workshop, learning by repairing work of other masters. Stradivari's workshop functioned as any other workshop. But soon, not on purpose, Stradivari's workshop revolved around the extraordinary talent of himself, as an individual. Like that of an artist's workshop, Stradivari's secrets died with him, his workshop being left unable to continue. Nevertheless, Stradivari never made art, Stradivari was never (considered) an artist, he is a craftsman.

Stradivari's work also defies Cellini's ideas, his work was very much time consuming and with the rise of the amount of luthiers at that time, the market proved fickle. The workshop not having the easiest of times to survive financially. (Sennet, 2009)

So, a question arises. Do we call this art? Or does it stay a craft?

apply the same principles to different cultures, these problems wouldn't be so perspicuous, maybe even non-existent. Painting is the dominant form of art from a Western point of view but this isn't the case everywhere. In Japan, painting was not as highly regarded and a lot of the time took on more of a decorating role, and thus was merely practiced as a craft. Painters as an individual were not as common as in the west, often only being named as part of a particular school of painting. (for example: 'A painting of the Hasagewa school'.) In the early ages of our Art history, during medieval times, this was the case in Europe as well, the painters were craftsmen, not being named for the work they did. But because painting later on became more and more important, they were studied and analyzed more than different art forms or crafts. The reason why we see all paintings as art and not as a craft, although early on they may have had the same status, is because art history was written after the facts and thus the crafts that cultivated themselves as art in the latter stages became in retrospect weightier. Although later in the Japanese art historical discourse, artists would get individually recognized for their work, it wasn't as self-evident and only really starting occurring a lot later

Nowadays craft has lost its purpose. Craft isn't useful anymore, with the rise of industrialization and capitalism, more efficient ways of producing have taken its place. Under capitalism, when you would make, for example, a piece of furniture, it just needs to work. We are striving for more, for less. A craftsman doesn't comprehend this. A craftsman works for the sake of his craft. Which ultimately leads to him, making less, but better. In a day and age where replacing is often cheaper than repairing, why bother? Practicing a craft has become a resilience to our contemporary society. (Sennet, 2009; Harari, 2017)

But does this make craftwork art? We could say that craftwork lacks the intellectual function that art has. But going back to the technique of Kintsugi, these objects have both a physical function and an intellectual one. They are utilitarian objects but they are created with a philosophical background. So where do we place them then? It is important to note that the Kintsugi technique/craft was constructed under a different culture with different philosophical notions. This is where the weakness in Sennett's writings lie, he's only analyzing a western notion of the arts and crafts. Whereas if we

than in its Western counterparts. The Japanese didn't have such an affinity for personality cults. (Kerr & Sokol, 2018)

The type of painting, oil painting almost not being present, is also greatly different, mostly consisting of ink drawings as murals on fusuma and byōbu (sliding doors and folding screens made out of paper and wood). The contrast became even more apparent during the Muromachi period (1333-1573). With the rise of Zen, painting deviated from its Chinese ancestry of complex polychrome painting and developed a new style of minimalistic monochrome ink paintings. The new cultural elite quickly took preference. Later on, the distinction went even further, minimalistic calligraphical ink paintings became the talk of the town. These ink calligraphy paintings often being so expressively painted, that they became unreadable and hovered on the verge of abstraction. Once again, abstraction predating Kandinsky but the west took no value in it. (Kerr & Sokol, 2018; Koren, 2008)

If being mentioned, it was often only the more complex Chinese style paintings because they could somewhat be related to medieval Western paintings. But painting was to begin with not even the dominant art form in Japan. Unlike Western philosophers, those in Japan wouldn't discuss philosophical ideas with the help of painting, they would prefer the use of ceramics and rituals, gardens and craftwork. (Kerr & Sokol, 2018; Yanagi, 2018; Koren, 2008)

Where Language Struggles

Richard Sennett's book (2009) is radical in the way it tries to formulate a different way of intellectual thinking. Sennett suggests an alternate way of conceiving and creating information, not through the mind but through creation. We've been thinking too much in words, something that hasn't been beneficial for everyone. A lot of artists will have

There is dust lying in the bottom of my teacup. Resting there, still. There is little water left. The clouded water too bitter to finish. I'm listening to David Chazam on Kiosk Radio, talking about the passing of Ryuichi Sakamoto. I feel sorrowfully at ease. At the same time, I'm doubting if I should write this passage, a hint of stress. My eyes feel dry, slightly burning from staring (e)motionlessly into my screen. Am I writing this just to break the writer's block? I stir my tea. My stare is broken. I look into the cup. The water, together with the residue follows the movement of my hand. I sigh, take the spoon, try to balance it on my finger. The motion in the water continues. The dust collects in the middle, forming a perfect circle. The water is still in motion, the residue has settled. I am stunned.

I do it again, the action repeats itself, again, and again, and again, and again, and again...

experienced this when they've had to explain their work. I think that we make work because that is our way of explaining. If I would have had the feeling I could have communicated the same in words, I wouldn't have spent all that time and resources to create something. But for us the idea doesn't do justice, experiencing it is different, making it is different. While making things, the material teaches us something. This is material consciousness. Craftsmen understand it too, but they don't have to explain themselves that often. Have you ever tried to depicting a physical action using only written words? Have you ever tried learning a physical action using only written words? Language struggles, it struggles a lot.

While writing this I've unconsciously been looking at myself doing something. It's a very simple action. I'll try to describe it using as few sentences as I can manage to make it feel fitting:

Damn, that's a lot of words,
and it still feels like I've failed.

Our society lacks attentiveness to material consciousness. Sennett is completely right in this. He never mentions, however, that this is only a Western issue. It almost feels a conscious decision because he lets different cultures aid him in his statements, so it's not like he doesn't know. Other cultures understood material consciousness and heavily depended on it. I quote the Tao Te Ching, written around 400Bc.

It is because everyone under Heaven recognizes beauty as beauty, that the idea of ugliness exists.

And equally if everyone recognized virtue as virtue,

This would merely create fresh conceptions of wickedness.

For truly 'Being and Not-being grow out of one another;

Difficult and easy complete one another.

Long and short test one another;

High and low determine one another.

Pitch and mode give harmony to one another.

Front and back give sequence to one another.'

Therefore the Sage relies on actionless activity,

Carries on wordless teaching,

But the myriad creatures are worked upon by him; he does not disown them.

He rears them, but does not lay claim to them,

Controls them, but does not lean upon them,

Achieves his aim, but does not call attention to what he does;

And for the very reason that he does not call attention to what he does

The idea of less is more has existed for a long time in Buddhism. Zen Buddhism, mostly found in Japan, does this best. These Zen-Buddhist philosophical ideas can often be encountered in other cultures as well, mostly when talking about being in tune with nature and handling material, colored by their respective schools of thought however. Marcus Aurelius has some passages in *Meditations* that feel like they could be copied straight from a Zen philosopher. Alvar Aalto references the Japanese as one of his big influences in handling space and material.

Inayat Khan smiled at me and asked, "Mr. Senzaki, will you tell me what the significance of Zen is?"

I remained silent for a little while, and then smiled at him. He smiled back at me. Our dialogue was over. (Senzaki, 1978, p. 4)

(A fragment from a conversation between Inayat Khan, a Sufi teacher, and Nyogen Senzaki, a Zen Buddhist.)

He is not ejected from fruition of what he has done.

(Tzu, est. 400 BC, chapter 2)

Note this 'Therefore the Sage relies on actionless activity, Carries on wordless teaching.' A few chapters later it says: 'But from the Sage it is so hard at any price to get a single word that when his task is accomplished, his work done.' (chapter 17) And it doesn't stop there: 'As good sight means seeing what is very small so strength means holding on to what is weak.' (chapter 52) And we can keep on finding these quotes of thinking without saying, combine this with their sense of material awareness and mindfulness, and you can feel that their way of thinking is based a lot more on this material consciousness. Although these quotes don't particularly mention material creation, it is no wonder why these cultures have a larger appreciation for prosaic craftwork. Buddhism opposes the modern West by trying to go back to the admiration of simple, something that has long been lost in the extravagance of Western culture.

Although Zen Buddhism is a religion. Zen, in itself, is universal.

Japan's History Of Aesthetics

Out of Zen grew a visual culture unique to Japan. What stands out about Japan is that a lot of indigenous writings can be found on Japanese art history. It plays a big role in their culture. A lot of their writings on art started as philosophical but can easily be transformed into an art theoretical discourse. While in the West art is about perfection, in Japan art is about the imperfection. Soetsu Yanagi describes Western art as the art of even numbers while Japanese art could be seen as the art of odd numbers. (2018, p. 146)

This Zen aesthetic really found its base in the 14th century during the Muromachi period. While these ideals were already present, mostly in literary works, their rise to aesthetics was at its high tide then. When talking about the Muromachi period we often refer to Sen No Rikyu, one of the most

influential Zen thinkers during the Muromachi. Rikyu was not feeling the interest of his contemporaries in the very finely decorated Chinese pottery. He revolutionized the tea ceremony, known by the Japanese term *chabi*, by introducing the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic. *Wabi-sabi* has its origin in India and China, these ideas made their way into Chinese Taoism in the 4th century BC, and later to Japan, around the 12th century AC. In the pre-Rikyu periods *wabi-sabi* was mostly used in literary works, but when used they would appear separately. *Wabi* refers to a way of life, a spiritual path. *Sabi* refers to material objects, literature and art. Because these two terms coexisted so often, for ease of use, *wabi* and *sabi* became intertwined. *Wabi-sabi* commonly meant loneliness, referring to the ultimate Buddhist goal of reaching Nirvana by getting rid of one's greed and self. It could also be called the beauty of poverty. But tea goes further than just the beauty of imperfection. In Japanese they also use the terms *buji* (natural beauty), *byojotei* (the beauty of everyday life), and *muge* (the beauty of egoless freedom). Rikyo was responsible for introducing the tea houses that resemble the houses of poor farmers and asked a rooftop baker to make his pottery. Rikyu was ordered

Although I fully follow his theory, there is one big problem not inherent with the theory in itself, but caused by its unintended consequences. Yanagi's texts and theories became quite popular which led to a huge boom in the success of *mingei* products. But because *mingei* became associated with the taste of the intellectual elite, the product quickly became fetishized. Yanagi himself established multiple *mingei* museums (the first opened in 1936). Further fetishizing them by putting them in this white cube, art context. Prices skyrocketed and these *mingei* objects became collector items. Craftsmen weren't producing out of sheer necessity but tried to reach the status of an artist so they could ask more money. People deliberately dropped things or made mistakes so they could repair them, making them lose their true meaning.

More mechanization started to appear, without usage of local materials, making *mingei* purists pay even more money for the real deal. (Yanagi, 2018, the Japanese perspective (1957); Kerr & Sokol, 2018; Koren, 2008)

to commit ritual suicide by his master, who was of peasant decent, because he thought Rikyu's ideals were a way of mocking him. Although the beauty of imperfection was present in all Buddhist sects, no other pursued it so eagerly as Zen.

Soetsu Yanagi, born in 1889, saw that because of globalization and Japan's aspiration to become economically viable, they were adapting more and more Western ideals and therefore losing bit by bit, parts of this unique Japanese identity. As a counterreaction to this rapid westernization of Japan, Yanagi developed the concept of *Mingei* (1933), or translated to English, folk craft, folk art or popular art.

Yanagi's aesthetical proposition consisted of beauty found in everyday, often utilitarian objects made by everyday craftsmen, opposing the Western ideal of art created by enlightened artists. For him the beauty in these objects consisted in the use of natural materials, traditional methods, simplicity, functionality and plurality meaning that these objects could easily be reproduced and were inexpensive

This is why the Western trend around *wabi-sabi* or *mingei* never helped to raise awareness, most of it was fake, a recreation. It lacked genuine character.

Wabi-sabi and *chabi* (tea) are part of Zen but don't equal it. This, combined with the dilution of its meaning following Western interest, is why I rather refrain from using the term *wabi-sabi*.

The Japanese have the terms *shin*, *gyo* and *so*. Each of them correspond with a particular aesthetic. The concept originated in calligraphy. *Shin* would stand for the standard script in which to write kanji. Kanji that could be found on street signs, newspapers, official documents etcetera, like standardized fonts. *Gyo* would refer to a semi-cursive font or handwriting. *Gyo* is still close to standardized script but it's just a bit more free. *Gyo* means 'running'. It looks like *shin*, but written on the run. *So* means 'grass', and could be compared to the real cursive writing of calligraphy artists or graffiti writers. Often so wild that these kanji were almost unreadable to the average person. Later *Shin*, *gyo* and *so* got adopted by painting, *shin* being finely

detailed paintings, gyo being a looser style maybe a bit more sketched and so being close to abstraction. Thus again a form of abstract painting, way earlier than what Western art history claims. (This doesn't mean that every form of abstract painting is so, shin paintings can also be found in modern abstraction.) Quickly the Japanese started using these terms when defining the aesthetic of about everything and with the rise of wabi-sabi, so became Japan's trademark, shin the Chinese and gyo, as the middle ground, Korea's trademark. But Japan also had a shin side, the intellectual elite often switching between the two styles. The shin side correlated more with Western art, thus in globalization shin took the foreground again. After WW2 Japan became so West oriented it lost a lot of its appreciation for so. (Yanagi, 2018, the Japanese perspective (1957); Kerr & Sokol, 2018)

"Anyone can appreciate the fascinating. Who can find beauty in the ordinary? That's Japan's extreme achievement." (Kerr, 2018, p. 116)

greatly influenced or fascinated by them. It's a shame that during the past decades Japan has fallen into the grasps of the capitalist system. They have idealized the West for their economic value and a lot of Japanese have lost their affinity for the simple and discreet, especially present in modern city life, where exaggeration rules.

The Japanese have this word, shibumi. Just like art it is vaguely defined. (Yanagi, 2018, The Japanese perspective (1957)) While art is more focused on ideas of intellect, concept or cultural value, shibumi focuses more on aesthetics, on this material consciousness. Yet in the sense of value assessment, talking about things of value, they could often substitute each other. Therefore, I don't mean that this is always the case, Art can be shibumi, but not all things shibumi are art and vice versa. Often shibumi is referred to as being subtle, simple and discreet. These are merely its means to an end. The core essence of shibumi lies in its timeless beauty. This is why Zen finds so much importance in nature. Nature will always be nature. The natural beauty of a thousand years ago, is still the natural beauty of today. It is because of

The End Of Art, The Beginning Of Shibumi

Zen does not exclude shin and gyo. They too can follow the aesthetic praised by Zen. The reason why we associate so with Zen is because the Zen culture is the only one appraising it. So holds a lot of the Zen values like simplicity, being unpretentious, of the everyday man. But above all Zen values balance. A fine balance between shin, gyo and so is more Zen than pure so. You can exaggerate so to such a degree that it won't be Zen anymore, while a rightly placed shin statue can contain everything Zen wants to capture. How this phenomenon works is very exacting and extremely challenging to articulate in words. I have been trying for a while. Being the ungifted writer that I am, I have also been failing at it for while. But this is where material consciousness comes in to play and it is no wonder that it happened here. Buddhist culture, especially Zen, has been loaded with material consciousness. The Japanese have a more developed feeling for these kinds of things and it's no wonder a lot of the proficient artists, designers and philosophers are so

shibumi that shin and gyo too can be appraised by Zen, so just refers more to a natural beauty and thus finds its way to shibumi more effortlessly. There are a lot of factors that contribute to something being shibumi and it would probably take me another whole essay to conclude. Rather, there is one particular detail about shibumi that I would further like to emphasize. Everything can be shibumi. The songlines of the aboriginals, the uncarved stones of the incas, that tree on the side of the road, Stradivari's violins, Klint's paintings, Warhol's Brillo boxes, the old chair of your granddad, a little medieval church in an Italian village, all these things could be shibumi, as long as they pass through eye of the eternal. I must stress that a grand portion of what we define as art would be excluded from shibumi, but thereafter we would open our views to all that is suppressed by the failures of Western art discourse.

This brings me back to the 'End of Art'. Arthur Danto also named Zen as one of the big inspirations behind his theories. Often referring to texts of the great Qingyuan Weixin, a Chinese Zen master from the 9th century, and the lectures of Dr. Suzuki at the Columbia Philosophy department in the 50s. The whole 'End of Art' theory stems from Weixin's Zen idea of enlightenment and spiritual journey. (Feng, 2021)

Any student of Eastern metaphysics can sympathize with the itinerary of Qingyuan. He began as we all do with the world as it is given to common sense. He then went through a phase in which the world so given was all illusion, as in Vedanta. "But he now sees that the illusion was an illusion (the world of common sense is metaphysically and religiously ultimate). Samsara and nirvana are one. Nothing distinguishes illusion and reality. Nothing need distinguish artworks from mere real things. It is not that they are not distinct. It is that the difference between them need not be visible. That had not come up in the literature on aesthetics as a problem. It was always taken for granted that works of art had a strong antecedent identity as such. (Danto, 2004, p. 58)

Therefore I would like to propose a juxtaposition to our conception of art. To open the spectrum, break the frame and create a way of thought that frees itself from the shortcomings of our Western art discourse. Where the artist is no more but a craftsman and he embraces art as functional. Where the everyday can thrive. Where art loses its elite status. Where trends no longer matter. Where new and old coexist. Where art and culture come together. Shibumi will never replace art but I hope they can coexist. This essay doesn't capture what shibumi is, but rather it contains the reasons and theoretical backbone of why we need it.

It follows Danto's theory of the end of art as we are not able to differentiate it. Shibumi doesn't bind itself to the time and space of production thus allowing the capacity to continuously be applied, removed from its original time and space of emergence.

Therefore it is more diverse and open to (other) culture(s) and material consciousness, and strives for finding eternal beauty rather than capturing a time frame.

Danto sees this captured in conceptual art. But Peng Feng (2021) argues that Danto's interpretation of Zen was not fully correct and that if he would have correctly interpreted Zen, (having missed the first principle of Zen: "The first principle is inexpressible" (Fung, 1976, p. 257) Because philosophers and theorists are too obsessed with language (instead of material consciousness.) it would rather be the art of living/the artist that prevails. Although I agree with the statement of the art of living. I think if we acknowledge art as functional, and thus the artist more on the same line as that of the craftsman. It is only the art of living or the art of the real that remains, breaking the frame to make way for non-artist made phenomenon. If the artwork can be non-distinguishable from the real thing, why differentiate?

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