*Paper prepared for the*

*Fifth Euroacademia Forum of Critical Studies*

*Asking Big Questions Again*

*11 – 12 November 2016*

*Lucca, Italy*

*This paper is a draft*

*Please do not cite or circulate*

# Noumenism

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**Abstract**
In this essay I make a case for a return to transcendence in art. I begin by defining our current moment as one of subject-generated and relative meaning. This analysis is derived both from the pervasive competition of a neoliberal economic system, and the shift in art from artist-generated meaning to spectator-generated meaning. I suggest that in relationship to this shift from external to internal meanings is a shift from transcendence to immanence. Immanence here defined is the experience of an unmediated "real" that is contained within the subject, a functional opposite of transcendence as it is traditionally defined: as a stepping outside of the self. While art has historically sought transcendence, art of the 21st century is more likely to seek immanence through abjection and immediacy, or displace meaning in art entirely through "open" and free form artworks. As an alternative I propose a Noumenist art that seeks a new transcendence through a reconsideration of alternative forms of knowledge. This transcendence would be an encounter with "noumena"—a border concept used by Immanuel Kant to described pre-representational reality. I expand on this concept through the writings on numen put forth by Rudolf Otto and Carl Jung, and examinations of belief made by William James. I suggest that Noumenist art allows for self-reflectivity, empathy, and hope, by opening a pathway to experiences of unmediated reality contained outside the self.

**Key Words:** Transcendence; Sublimity; Noumena; Trauma; Abject

**Prelude**
In 2013 I participated in an experiment with a group of dancers in which each dancer led a blindfolded and disoriented partner around the studio. The "blind" partner was first spun in circles and then led, by way of a discreet hand on the chest and lower back, through the dance studio at various speeds and in various directions. When leading, I found the most interesting aspect of this experiment to be the exploration of the other dancer's interior conception of the space. For when a blindfolded dancer walked through what they assumed to be a wall, they would seize up and stop—whether a wall was actually present or not. Our conceptions of the world around us are similarly hedged-in by seemingly solid, but potentially fallible boundaries. One of the purposes of this essay is to explore the formidable walls that have been set up around knowledge in the 21st century. These walls are seemingly impenetrable, but may betray the same faults as my fellow dancer's interior landscape. If so, a renewed and explorative vigor in art may allow us to tear down these walls and step into the unknown worlds beyond.

## Introduction

> *"There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea—infinite wealth or power. It does not manage to present any example from reality to verify this Idea. In making science subordinate to itself through technologies, especially those of language, it only succeeds, on the contrary, in making reality increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady."*
> (Lyotard 1988, 39)

On a practical level, most of life is dependent less on absolute knowledge than it is on practical knowledge. Survival in a precarious environment requires a close attention to what works and what doesn't. This pragmatism is heightened in a neoliberal economy that demands a malleable subject—one willing to change jobs, locations, and even personalities at a moment's notice. The instability of our financial situation requires constant attention to the changing winds of opportunity, and a constant grooming of our own projected persona as a means to advertise our economic viability.[i] In this environment of pervasive competition, "success" is often valued over character. And success is not inherent to the subject, but is something that has to be earned or achieved. We are fueled by a rhetoric of "fulfilling our dreams," "living up to our potential," and "being all that we can be." This language reveals the high value we place on the subject as an acting agent, a value also demonstrated in celebrity culture. If some fluid concept of success is our highest good, our icons become celebrities that have, in our minds, achieved this success (usually through acquiring money or fame). We model our lives after these successful figures by emulating their behaviors, clothing, personas, and buying habits. Just as celebrities achieve fame not through privileged access to reality or truth but through social connections, hard work, flexibility, and "street smarts," we value knowledge not for its objective validity, but for its practical use in our lives.

In academic thought, deconstructive theory has examined perceived reality and found it highly unstable. Truth, as an idea communicated through language, becomes subject to the disconnect of signifier and signified. What is meant, what is experienced, and what is, are recognized as incompatible concepts. Bias permeates ideology until all meaning becomes subjective. In contemporary Western culture, nearly constant exposure to advertising necessitates the daily dismantling of "truth" messages.[ii] So we are all cynics by necessity and learn from experience that the closest thing to pure (that is non-exploitative) truth to which we have access is generated solely in the self. And this is a paradox as the subject position is one that is known to be biased (note its use in the word "subjective"). But with all truth in question, personal truth is deemed safest, and further isolates each from the other by nullifying rigorous debate and dismantling communities oriented around shared belief. Instead we model our beliefs after successful icons and care less that we are right, and more that we have chosen a truth that "works for us." But the consequence of locating truth solely within ourselves is the limiting of our ability for self expansion. Practical truths derived from our limited experience in the world often cause us to dismiss the claims of others. We are selfish in our knowledge and care little about what "works" for others unless it interferes with our lifestyle. Community falls prey to competition.

## Transcendence

*"Why this fascination with trauma, this envy of abjection, during this time? To be sure, motives existed within art, writing, and theory alike. As suggested at the outset, there was a dissatisfaction with the given model of reality as so much text or image only; it was as though the real, repressed in this poststructuralist version of postmodernism, had returned in traumatic guise."*
(Foster 2015, 26)

A kind of self-actualization, styled after pop-icons or simple economic success, has replaced the more historically accepted notion of self-transcendence. To transcend is to step outside of the self. It is the primary ingredient of self-reflectivity for without moving beyond the self, how we can we reflect on it? With self-transcendence comes the word "transcendent," a term that shares historical resonance with two other words for beyond-ness: "the sublime" and "noumena." Although each term bears a slightly different history and connotation, they each reference an experience that overwhelms the subject's physical and mental capacities, leaving her powerless to recreate the experience in language. This experience is understood as an encounter with "ultimate" reality—that is, reality unmediated by a subject. While the historic notion of transcendence will be explored in more detail later in this essay, here I present what has come to replace it in recent times. Trauma is an experience of unmediated reality that has been referred to as the "the contemporary sublime." While sharing with transcendence the complete overwhelming of the subject's ability to represent, it differentiates itself from transcendence in one crucial aspect. [iii] Trauma is immanent to the subject, and thus characterized by an extreme turning-inward that is the antithesis of the turning-outward that happens through transcendence. And while a central aspect of transcendence is its ability to transform and change the subject, trauma is deeply destructive, for the ultimate reality that is experienced through trauma is death (Morley 2010, 12).[iv]

Despite the destruction of trauma we seek immanence for its stabilizing access to the real. Although death is not desirable in itself, in an unstable environment it is one absolute that we can be certain of. Sigmund Freud referred to the desire for self-annihilation as the death drive. And while Freud introduced the term in 1920 (in his book *The Pleasure Principle*), the increasing precarity of contemporary life can be understood as causing an increase in this tendency in our thinking and in our art. In Whitechapel Gallery's edited anthology *The Sublime* (2010), Simon Morley describes a tendency among contemporary artists to seek sublimity through immanence rather than transcendence. But beyond this tendency toward "downward and deflationary curves," he describes contemporary artists as avoiding even the terminology of transcendence to describe their work for fear of association with both "malevolent politics and inauthentic mass culture" (Morley 2010, 19). Instead, contemporary art often seeks immanence through immediacy, explores the line separating subject and object, and engages the ultimate annihilation of the subject in death.

Contemporary Western culture has valorized the individual at the cost of the community, reduced truth to opinion, and transcendence to immanence. The results of such pervasive cynicism have been deeply negative. Neoliberal competition has caused us to equate human value with success or economic potential, the privatization of truth has discouraged self-reflectivity, and the reduction of reliable absolutes to the trauma of death has precluded optimism. How do we re-establish a culture of hope, reflectivity, community, and care? In this paper I explore the possibility of a renewed transcendence and an art that seeks transcendent encounters. This art would allow societal critique, help heal conflict by encouraging empathy, and work towards establishing hope through the pursuit of an unmediated reality that is true, non-destructive, and originating outside the self.

## Death and the Open Work

*"The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."*
(Barthes 1977, 148)

*"All this explains how contemporary art can be seen as an epistemological metaphor. The discontinuity of phenomena has called into question the possibility of a unified, definitive image of our universe; art suggests a way for us to see the world in which we live, and, by seeing it, to accept it and integrate it into our sensibility. The open work assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it is it."*
(Eco 1989,90)

The shift from objective, external sources of meaning to subjective, internal sources of meaning can easily be observed in the art objects produced in the last 50 years. Over the course of the 20th century, the responsibility for generating meaning in art has slowly shifted from the artist to the spectator. This change can be observed in the way that art objects are viewed. When an artist is considered responsible for assigning a specific meaning to a work, we ask questions of art such as, "What is the artist trying to communicate?" This approach has been common for much of art history since the Romantic period, but in the 20th century (particularly since the 1950s), the artist's intention is devalued in relationship to the increased valuation of the spectator's personal experience. This shift has been documented in academic texts from Roland Barthe's *The Death of the Author* in 1967 to Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* in 2009. This profound change affects not only the way art is viewed, but also the nature of the art objects themselves. In 1962 Umberto Eco penned the seminal *Opera Aperta*, which was then translated and published in English in 1989 as *The Open Work*. In this text he sets out to describe "informal art" as art that increases the amount of "information" contained in an object. Usually this occurs by making the work more ambiguous in order to prompt the audience to supply their own meaning (Eco 1989, 85).[v] In other words, if the meaning of a work is disguised or infinitely multiplied, the audience might extract a meaning from the work that suits them personally. This gesture seems more egalitarian than the "artist as God" mentality that dominated previous generations, but also discourages artists from taking responsibility for the coherence of their own work. Some artists combat this accusation by sidestepping the role of artist-as-creator entirely through chance procedures, appropriation, curation, and art generated through collaborative projects and collectives. More frequently, art takes on the tendencies of these practices, becoming less determined, disguising the artist's hand, and displacing creative choice to external processes and agents. These objects imitate the chaos of the world around them and reinforce the view that the only reliable structures are generated from within the subject herself.

The problem with this obsessive openness is a general reduction of an artwork's ability to induce dissonance in a viewer, allowing for change or new perspectives. A fundamental feature of transcendence is the transformation of the subject, but the art I have been describing is not a transcendent art. In an open work the primary encounter a viewer experiences is with himself, and even this encounter requires a commitment on the part of the viewer that should in no way be assumed. In a recently published book, prominent art historian and critic Hal Foster challenges the ambiguity of the open work by suggesting that by disguising meaning in art, we actually inoculate the viewer against encounters of any kind.

> "The assumption is that to leave a work undone is to prompt the viewer to complete it, and yet this attitude can easily become an excuse not to execute fully. A work that appears unfinished hardly ensures that the viewer will be engaged; indifference is as likely a result, perhaps a more likely one." (Foster 2015, 133)

The title of Foster's book, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (2015) reveals his grim view of an artistic climate that has become too fuzzy to be effectual. In fact, the idea of affecting change seems far from Umberto Eco's goal when he advocates for an art that increased the amount of "information" presented. The use of the word "information" instead of "meaning" here is telling in that it signals the reduction of the artistic experience to data. Art is and always has been "open" to some degree, but when an art is as chaotic as the world around it we are less likely to experience transformation through transcendent encounters. Data informs rather than transforms.

In *Bad New Days* Hal Foster breaks down art since 1990 into five terms he finds particularly relevant. These are "abject," "archival," "mimetic," "precarious," and "post-critical?" While many of these terms reflect the trends I have been describing, here I want to focus on just one. Abject art activates the immanence of trauma, and, as such, is both the antithesis of and the replacement for the transcendent art of previous times. For many, trauma represents the contemporary sublime; for, like a sublime encounter, a traumatic experience cannot be adequately captured in a representative form such as language.[vi] But trauma, unlike transcendence, is centered obsessively on the subject's mind and body. It does not require a stepping outside of oneself, or the consideration of an unmediated reality other than death.[vii] This is a sublime experience acceptable for contemporary Western subjects whose only reliable absolute in life is the certainty of its eventual end.[viii] The truth-value we attribute to trauma may also be partially explained by the traces trauma leaves on the body and mind. In the age of crime shows, self-help, and therapy, we take seriously the stories

damaged bodies can tell. Speech is often mistrusted; ideology is widely considered propaganda; but damaged bodies bear an unspoken witness to a sublime absolute that was immanently experienced.

If it is only through abjection that we can be truly said to encounter unmediated reality, then some artists seek that reality through art that directly employs trauma. This abject art strives for a fixed truth wherever it can be found. In contemporary Western culture this means the truth of injured or maimed bodies, human and animal waste, terrifying or grotesque images, and even corpses. The breakdown of the subject/object distinction—bodies becoming matter (human waste, corpses), matter (such as food) becoming bodies—fascinates the abject artist because it appears to operate on an objective level that precludes subjectivity. Abject art induces trauma by presenting the disintegration of subject into object, or else presents the evidence of trauma on the body as a witness of its undoing. In the opening of this paper I described the knowledge desirable to the contemporary Western subject as "practical" in that it is a knowledge that directly applies to the task of navigating their precarious environment. Truth, in trauma and abject art, correspondingly, is the traumatic pushback of the environment on the subject. It is the not succeeding. When survival is what matters most, death becomes the only objective reality.[ix] Abject artists dig up the dead, as it were, in search of witnesses to the orienting power of contemporary culture's only reliable absolute.

But unless the dead speak (and if they did how could we believe them?), unmediated reality remains always hidden behind a chaotic mess of traces and half-truths. But what of transcendence? Is an overwhelming encounter with an unmediated reality outside the self still possible? Some would say yes, and define this experience as an encounter with an "other."[x] And, like trauma, these transcendent experiences also leave their traces. But if we are to observe these traces and learn from them, it is necessary to look beyond the limited witness provided by the damaged body, and consider truths found in packages other than pain. For while we cannot deny trauma due to the efficacy of the cause (death/failure), our bodies, as bearers of traces, lie as easily as any other representative form.[xi] Instead of decreasing the kinds of knowledge we consider to be objective we should instead *increase* our pool of traces, acknowledge all causes as equally efficacious, and all traces as equally problematic. In this way we increase our access points to the real and seek truth from a variety of sources. To understand this further we must make a brief epistemological detour.

## Traces

*"The sublime cannot inhabit any sensible form. There are natural objects that are beautiful, but there cannot be a natural object that is sublime. The true sublime, the sublime proper and properly speaking (das eigentliche Erhabene) relates only to the ideas of reason."*
*(Derrida 1978, 44)*

In epistemology, knowledge is traditionally defined as a justified true belief (K=JTB). Notice the presence in the equation of the word "belief." Knowledge is a justified concept *believed* by the subject to be true. Belief, so necessary to all knowledge, is itself a fascinating study. The psychologist and philosopher William James found that a subject did not need to lean on experiences in the sensory world in order to hold concrete conceptions of words such as "freedom" and "immortality." While theoretically these concepts should be empty, existing in language alone, James determined instead that they actually worked backwards to form "the background of all of our facts." (James 1902, 73)

> "This absolute determinability of our mind by abstractions is one of the cardinal facts in our human constitution. Polarizing and magnetizing us as they do, we turn towards them and from them, we seek them, hold them, hate them, bless them, just as if they were so many concrete beings. And beings they are, beings as real in the realm which they inhabit as the changing things of sense are in the realm of space." (James 1902, 74)

The reality that these abstract concepts represent is difficult to study concretely, but if they do truly inform our beliefs to the extent that James suggests, belief itself deserves greater consideration. For if belief finds its source in abstract notions that have the same substance as sensory perceptions, belief could be as substantial an evidentiary basis for truth as physical experience. Belief, then, found in ourselves and in others, should spark an enquiry into the subject's justification for those beliefs, whether those justifications come from spiritual, emotional, or physical sources.

For many contemporary Western subjects, knowledge is only "justified" when it is reinforced by immediate physical experience. The high value we place on the physical is revealed in the authority we grant to the scientific method. In this case knowledge is derived from observation, and so far as we can manage, this observation is unbiased. However, even with all attempts made to remove bias from the experiment, developments in the field of quantum mechanics have made it clear that the act of observation alone is capable of fundamentally altering the physical nature of some objects we observe.[xii] But perhaps attributing objective truth to the realm of science was never fully appropriate. For science, dealing as it does in processes and experimentations, can be seen as the embodiment of practical knowledge. The scientific method begins with a hypothesis. Akin to belief, a hypothesis is not considered proven by an experiment,

but rather "supported," or else not. Perhaps this language of supposition, experimentation, and support could be extended outside the limits of physical matter.

In exploring the possibility of a renewal of transcendence in art, I recognize the need to reconsider forms of knowledge currently considered unreliable or obsolete. These include mystical experience, cultural tradition, religious ritual, narrative, and others. By embracing alternative paths to knowledge, we properly consider the subject as a whole self. The body as physical matter has been privileged in recent thought, but this has often been at the expense of the subject's spiritual, emotional, even cognitive, facets. In contrast, privileging the body causes a premature dismissal of non-Western forms of knowledge, and limits the possibility of absolute truth to death itself. Just as we understand the truth of trauma through the "trace" of physical effects, we should also seek to understand other truths through other traces. And these traces may not take the form of the language of witness we prefer. Mystical experience, as one example, is often defined by its very ineffability.[xiii] But if we open up our eyes to traces of all kinds, we can follow the path of knowledge as it reveals itself in changed thinking, changed lifestyle, and changed beliefs.

## Noumena

> *"…the face of the Other 'expresses itself,' manifests itself, …through itself and not through another…Its manifestation per se consists in a being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, '*expressing itself.*'…Levinas knows exactly what he is doing here. He is claiming immediacy for the Other's self-expression. 'The immediate is the face to face.'"*
> (Westphal 1992, 83)

Throughout this paper I have used interchangeably the terms "the transcendent," "the sublime," and "unmediated reality." Each of these terms refers to the thing behind the representation of the thing that we encounter. The unmediated exists outside of representation and is thus objective fact—at least in the reliability of its "otherness." As adjectives, "transcendent" and "sublime" describe encounters that overwhelm the subject's ability to interpret them. A transcendent experience goes one step further in that it also takes the subject outside of himself. Trauma, in contrast, is an experience that is sublime but not transcendent for it transforms the subject through the subject's annihilation. This annihilation is experienced in the traumatic act, but can be transcended later allowing for great transformation. Thus growth stemming from past experiences of trauma should not be confused with the trauma itself. This explains how trauma can be considered a "contemporary sublime," but not a contemporary transcendent.[xiv] In trauma we encounter death. In transcendence we encounter something else. In order to begin to explore the unmediated reality encountered in the transcendent experience, I hereby introduce a lesser-known word used to describe that reality. That word is noumena.

Immanuel Kant used the word noumena as a companion to the word "phenomena." A phenomenon is an event or object experienced with the senses and thus fraught with the usual concerns of object vs. appearance, representation vs. reality, sign vs. signifier, etc.[xv] Noumena are beyond the sensory world. A "thing in itself" that is not reduced, shaped, or interpreted by human subjects, noumena cannot be encountered according to Kant, and thus can't be known, but instead exist simply as a "boundary concept" whose primary purpose is to help us recognize the limits of our sensory understanding (Kant 1998, 362). Kant's hesitation to define noumena in any positive way is born of impossibility. We can only "prove" the existence of things that can be perceived with the senses, and sensory perception (as a kind of interpretation) is incommensurable with noumena. Yet we encounter the absolute reality of death through micro-deaths in the form of physical injuries, psychological damage, and failure. Could we then not also encounter noumena through noumenist glimpses of another kind, those that pierce through to our senses and speak to a larger other? One could argue that death as the end of life is an absolute reality that cannot be denied. But isn't the noumenal (as the boundary concept Kant described) also an absolute reality that cannot be denied? Of course the trace of noumenal experience is more likely to reveal itself in changed thinking and emotions rather than the changed bodies of physical trauma, but if the vast literature of first-hand accounts of transcendent experience can be believed (and as I argued above they should at least be considered), then it seems probable that noumena do in fact enter our consciousness—even to the degree that they can be acknowledged as such.

I have broken from Immanuel Kant's definition of noumena in allowing the possibility for noumenal experience, but I am not the only one who has done so. The philosopher Rudolf Otto and psychologist Carl Jung also define noumena in this way, even going beyond embracing its experiential possibility to characterizing noumena with the positive attribute of "holiness." Holiness, as described by Jung, is the highest value an object can possess. Furthermore, it carries the characteristic of self-transcendence in that it is not something experienced by choice, but encountered forcefully through the experience of noumena.

> "Nobody ever feels himself as the subject of such a process, but always as its object. He does not perceive holiness, it takes him captive and overwhelms him; nor does he behold it in a revelation, it reveals itself to him, and he cannot even boast that he has understood it properly. Everything happens apparently outside the sphere of his will, and these happenings are contents of the unconscious. Science is unable to say anything more than this, for it cannot, by an act of faith, overstep the limits appropriate to its nature." (Jung 1969, 152)

While acknowledging the power and veracity of the experience of holiness, Jung recognized it as belonging to the sphere of faith rather than science. He does at least relegate the numinous to the unconscious mind rather than the conscious one however, granting that it is not a product of the subject's individual persona, but belongs to the realm of the "collective unconscious," or group mind. Thus the noumenal, according to Jung, is a concept that is shared by all, and numinous experiences are possible for all subjects.

As a philosopher and theologian, Rudolf Otto is willing to go further in his definition of noumena and does so in his 1917 text, *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto uses the same Latin root as Kant and Jung ("numen," a nod of the head signaling authority or power) to form the word "numinous."[xvi] The numinous, according to Otto, is a synonym of the holy and produces a "creature feeling" in us that signals our inadequacy in the face of something wholly "other."

> "All that this new term, 'creature-feeling', can express, is the note of self-abasement into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind; whereas everything turns upon the character of this overpowering might, a character which cannot be expressed verbally, and can only be suggested indirectly through the tone and content of a man's feeling-response to it. And this response must be directly experienced in oneself to be understood." (Otto 1917, 10)

Feeling as an important indicator of the numinous is central for Otto. He even claims that without a subject having already experienced a "deeply felt moment of religious experience" himself, this experience would be impossible to describe (Otto 1917, 8). This telling preamble points out a crucial aspect of the numinous: it is commonly experienced, and it is experienced through emotions. While recognizing these emotions as fully subjective, Otto insists that it is through the quality of the feeling that we come to understand the numen itself. In an attempt to place positive attributes on the numinous Otto uses the word "mysterium" to describe it.

> "Conceptually 'mysterium' denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. The term does not define the object more positively in its qualitative character. But though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is something absolutely and intensely positive. This pure positive we can experience in feelings, feelings which our discussion can help to make clear to us, in so far as it arouses them actually in our hearts." (Otto 1917, 13)

Otto expresses frustration that feelings are not treated more seriously in contemporary thought, and puts out a call for psychology to work to classify and record feelings and emotions "according to their qualitative differences" (Otto 1917, 17). Nearly a full century later, affect theory has begun the task of qualifying feelings and emotions and taking seriously the impact these can have on the subject and the environment. While I will not be able illuminate more fully the work that has been done in affect theory in this paper, it will be sufficient to state merely that intuitions and feelings seem to possess a greater power to shape the subject and the world around than we (at least in Western culture) have been inclined to give them.[xvii]

The concept of an encounter with noumena is tricky, but I believe central for the redemption of transcendence in contemporary Western culture. If only immediate, physical experiences are considered justified forms of knowledge, noumenon can only be grasped as a "boundary concept" (as Kant described). But if we embrace emotional and spiritual change as equally justified forms of knowledge, experiences of the transcendent sublime could not only signal encounters with noumena, but also allow those experiences to be knowledge-generating events. If we are to re-open the door to a transcendent that heals rather than harms, a good place to start is through the art we produce. Sacred and religious art of the past was often a vessel for the "malevolent politics" Simon Morley laments, and I am not calling for a return to that here. But if we take from that time the pursuit of the holy, the desire to transcend the self, and the inclination to view these transcendent experiences as veracious events, we might restore to art the functions of healing, transformation, and self-reflection.

# A Noumenist Art

*"That kind of post-Modernism, to the extent that it exerts—by means of critics, curators, gallery directors, and collectors—intense pressure on artists, aligns pictorial inquiry to the current state of "culture," and strips artists of their responsibility to the question of the nondemonstrable. That question is, to me, the only one worthy of life's high stakes, and of the world of thought in the coming century."*

*(Lyotard 1982, 135)*

> *"What is beyond my false self is not simply my true self, but the not-myself in proper relation to which it first becomes possible for me to be my true self. Only by losing myself, in the sense of going beyond myself, do I ever truly find myself."* (Westphal 1992, 80)

What would happen if we established a Noumenist art that actively sought unmediated reality through experiences of self-transcendence? This would be an art, not open to any and every interpretation, but an open invitation and a pathway to encounter noumena. Noumenist artists would claim the work they make as access points to the transcendent, acknowledge the traces that have formed them, and pursue these traces to their source. This would be an art of hope and exploration, not an art of dogma or defeatism. Encounters with Noumenist artworks would become encounters with a reality unmediated by, but experienced through objects—or else bear the traces of another's experience of the same. This courageous art would carve a space for empathy, societal critique, and intellectual expansion. For many, this proposition summons propaganda fears of mass deception and mass delusion, and indeed these fears always deserve our careful consideration. But if we open ourselves to all beliefs and experiences, honor all kinds of witnessings to truth, and embrace knowledge in all its forms, we only increase our ability to reflect properly on the beliefs that we ourselves carry.

The desire to build walls around what we can rightly know is done in a spirit of fear. We are afraid of belief, afraid to believe what might require transformation and change. But the deconstruction of what can be truly known in the last 100 years has reduced true knowledge to the hopeless inevitability of death. In this climate we disregard instincts, affects, and other perceptions in futile pursuit of the control that comes from the possession of reliable data. But this control is merely an illusion and destroys our ability to reflect back on ourselves or listen empathetically to others. What I propose is the pursuit of truth with a spirit of courage. A reaching out of all of our intuitive faculties: our five senses, our instincts, our emotions, our ability to reason, and all the shared community knowledge we can gather. By courageously listening, sensing, and feeling with our whole self, we create a space where new social systems can be proposed, alternatives to pervasive competition and neoliberalism explored, a new-found spirit of deep empathy and compassion instilled, and a culture developed that is based on respect, care, and the rigorous pursuit of knowledge in its deepest sense.

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## Notes:

[i] Niels van Doorn expands on this principle in his essay "The Neoliberal Subject of Value: Measuring Human Capital in Information Economies" (2014). Here he describes the contemporary subject as being responsible for investing in his or her own "stock" as human capital. Success, then, is only possible for a constantly vigilant subject who strives to appreciate his or her own capital through all life activities, whether work-related or social. This fosters "free labor" (unpaid internships, participation in social media, etc.), overwork, and a focus on the individual himself as fully responsible for his own economic position.

[ii] The harmful effects of mass media was perhaps first theorized by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in: *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944). While they feared the unconscious manipulation of an unwitting public, contemporary Western culture is very aware of their own manipulation via advertising and the media. Subjects today are more likely to be insulted by an over-obvious sales technique than afraid of a subtle one.

[iii] Simon Morley states in the introduction to his edited anthology on the sublime: "Not surprisingly, discussions of the sublime in contemporary art can be covert or camouflaged ways of talking about experiences that were once addressed by religious discourses and that remain pertinent within an otherwise religiously skeptical and secularized contemporary world. But contemporary thinkers and artists largely reject traditional conceptions of a self or soul that moves upwards towards some ineffable and essential thing or power. Instead, the selected texts tend to follow downward or deflationary curves, and the contemporary sublime is mostly about *immanent transcendence,* about a transformative experience that is understood as occurring in the here and now." (Morley 2010, 18).

[iv] Some may take issue with my characterization of trauma as inherently destructive here, for many who have undergone trauma have consequently experienced great growth. I would argue that the trauma itself was destructive, and that it was the subject's ability to transcend the trauma and see beyond their experience that allowed for change. Trauma and transcendence can be interlinked concepts.

[v] Semiotic theory creates a distinction between a "signified" (object) and a "signifier" (indexical sign such as language). Many have extrapolated from this an even deeper distinction between things as they are, and things as we experience them to be.

[vi] Immanuel Kant defines the sublime as the subject's inability to properly imagine what the reason recognizes to be true. I break from him here to claim that imagination and reason are linked concepts and what does violence to the one necessarily does violence to the other.

[vii] I am here defining both immanent and transcendent experiences of unmediated reality as first-person-subjective-brute facts. This places them in the same category as pain, though I am not necessarily equating either experience with pain exclusively.

[viii] Although I do not do so here, a study comparing the rise of terrorism and suicide with a newfound focus on trauma and abjection would be a useful expansion of my analysis.

[ix] It is important to note that while abjection is certainly a theme in contemporary art, it is only one of many themes and is not indicative of Western art as a whole. Most artists would avoid the utter defeatism that is found there. However, we can see a similar drive towards the efficacy of immanence in the rise of performance art. Much art scholarship in the last ten years has been dedicated to the "liveness" of performance art and the documents it leaves behind. Liveness or presentness here is the sought-after definitive truth of immanence exercised in less destructive ways.

[x] See Merold Westphal's "A Phenomenological Account of Religious Experience" in "Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings, 4th ed.".

[xi] Some might object to my description of the body as a representational form here, but I argue that bodies are representations, not only in the sense of the "persona" we project outwards to our environment (I mean this in the Jungian sense), but also in that the very physical stuff of our bodies is fundamentally representational. We shape ourselves through lifestyle choices, and are shaped by the world around us. The body is not analogous to the self. Anyone who has seen the corpse of a loved one can attest to this fact.

[xii] Here I am referring to the double-slit experiment in which matter is shown to change its behavior from particles to waves based solely on observation.

[xiii] William James claims "ineffability" as one of three essential qualities of religious experience along with "noetic quality" and "transiency" (or limited duration). While religious experience and experiences of noumena are not necessarily equated by definition, my qualification of the transcendent as "pre-representational" also contains within it transcendent's ineffability.

[xiv] Neither the experience of transcendence nor trauma are choices made by the subject. One can choose to "open oneself up" to either of these experiences (by seeking them, studying them, etc.), but as an encounter, the experience itself, is a "bumping up against" some absolute truth or reality independent of our own agency.

[xv] At least for Kant, reason itself is an object of the senses as it is through sensory experiences that our faculties of reason operate. Therefore, the two are deeply implicated and when I use one, the other can be assumed (Kant 1998, 358).

[xvi] D.P. Simpson's Cassell's Standard Latin Dictionary defines "numen" as – Inis, n. (nuo), *a nodding with the head, a nod.* Lit., Lucr. TRANSF., as an expression of will, *command, consent.* Ingen.: ad numen mentis, Lucr. Esp., of a deity, *the divine will, divine command:* deo cuius numina parent omnia, Cic.' Mundum consent regi numine deoru, Cic.; numina, divum, numine fatorum, Verg. Hence, *the might of a deity, majesty, divinity:* numen Iunonis adora, Verg.; Cic., Liv.; of deities themselves: nagna numina, pia numina, Verg.; of the Roman emperors: violatum numen Augusti, Tac.

[xvii] Lauren Berlant takes up affect theory as a lens to deal with the subject of precarity. Teresa Brennan has produced a wonderful and important text on affective transmission that bears heavily on the questions I have posed here. My own thinking has also been heavily influenced by Steven Shaviro's *Post Cinematic Affect,* which views contemporary culture through the lens of affective maps he ties to digital culture. Affect theory as a field chooses to embrace as many as possible of a person's sensing faculties (including intuition, feeling, emotion) and I am truly excited about the new research that is becoming possible in this field.