NIHILISM AND THE FORMULATION OF A PHILOSOPHY OF ART

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Nihilism is often associated with feelings of despair, hopelessness and meaningless. It is certainly true that once the implications of this philosophy become apparent that these feelings are valid. However, this reaction is merely the first stage of dealing with nihilism and stopping here fails to examine the various types of nihilism that deal specifically with knowledge, ethics, metaphysics, truth, and art. Nihilism at its base is a philosophy that recognizes the history of human thought and what it means to be and to think. My focus is the way in which a completed nihilism is in fact an emancipatory act and the implications it has for art and the artist in the 21st century.
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PART I
FRAMING ART
Preface

Since the twentieth century onward, the industrial culture has articulated an interest in technological advances that promote ease of communication to a wider audience. We were witness to an exponential growth of technology’s capacity to gather, interpret, and process information. The technological inventions and scientific discoveries that have shaped how we view the world have also had an influence on art and the artist. Information and communication technology has increased to the extent that the ability to inform oneself of the artistic endeavors of others is easily accessed. That we are capable of reflecting upon the changes that have been applied to the religious, cultural, racial, philosophical, artistic and scientific realms both locally and generally, places emphasis on investigating interpretations of the world as a much more relevant method for understanding social phenomena. The older model, a teleological one, applied a meta-narrative to the story of the human being. In this model there was purpose for why things developed as they did and dealing with phenomena deemed as mundane or socially significant from the tribal to the industrial culture was placed within this guideline for living and judged accordingly. But, as one has discovered, the possibility for multiple interpretations of seemingly similar acts of social human behavior raises the problem of validity between and among those with dissimilar notions. The old model emphasized a relationship of domination and submission, that one should eliminate and prove the error of the opposing idea or purpose, while a nihilistic interpretation sees no Truth but merely places emphasis on the notion that no overarching purpose exists other than those we construct.

In this paper I discuss and examine, through a nihilistic viewpoint, the
relationship between the creative act particular to the artist and the influence that
nihilism has had in the twentieth century. The premise of my thesis does not claim that
the underlying motives of particular artists or works promulgated nihilism. Rather, the
perspective of nihilism serves merely to provide a better understanding of the influential
force that this philosophical viewpoint has had and continues to have. Furthermore, I
attempt to create a philosophy of art for the moment in which we live, understanding
that this, too, may be promulgated and shared, but also changed, varied, and eventually
destroyed to make room for the stronger, more appropriate philosophical claims that
promote an awareness of the hermeneutical games of creation. Art is essentially
nothing more than the engagement of the human being with the world as she perceives
it and any object she wishes to signify as art becomes so.

Lastly, nihilism is more than the sum of the vernacular misnomer of a “philosophy
of nothingness” or any other parodistic stab (think The Big Lebowski): any discussion on
nihilism should incorporate a clear distinction between the various forms and references
that have been applied to the term. In the following section, an attempt is made to
clearly understand what is meant by nihilism. Starting out with very short and general
definitions to those that are more specific and complex, I examine the meaning of each
and discuss their relevance both in terms of what they imply and encompass as well as
any objections or additions that should be made.
A Personal Nihilism

From the Merriam Webster online dictionary:

German *Nihilismus*, from Latin *nihil* nothing Date: circa 1817
1a: a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless. b : a doctrine that denies any objective ground of truth and especially of moral truths. 1

Although I do find traditional values and belief systems unfounded in the sense that a universe without the human imposition of purpose and utility — giving purpose and sense, the need to qualify, quantify, and act as an advocate for my species — has been ingrained in me so deeply that I find it hard to disassociate myself from these desires. Abstracting myself from the social realm of humanity, I understand that through time, the present, the “now,” will become obscure, muddled, or misunderstood, and the direct meaning and understanding (if it ever existed) of the cultural sphere and world of my time and place will have changed. Values and belief systems are institutionalized methods for constructing social behavior that serve to promote the “A and B” “master and slave” relationship of a will to power and of domination. Neither party wishes to acquiesce its power to the status quo, but eventually B overtakes A, and this type of transaction and interaction continues ad infinitum. I subscribe that, fundamentally, values and belief systems in themselves cannot be justified. At the same time, I recognize the essentiality of constructing values and belief systems on some level if the human being is to contribute in any manner to the benefit of the species (defense, food gathering, socializing, procreation, culture, etc.)

From the American Heritage Dictionary:

Nihilism: 1a. An extreme form of skepticism that denies all existence. b. A doctrine holding that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. 2. Rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a willingness to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious belief. 3. The belief that destruction of existing political or social institutions is necessary for future improvement. ²

This definition seems to get closer to what I feel nihilism can mean. With the exception of denying all existence I would agree with the assertion that all values in their essence are baseless and that a supra-sensory world or world of perfect forms and ideas are non-existent. That is to say, our understanding of the physical world is immediately filtered through layers of perception through imperfect human senses.

The stimulation of a nerve is first translated into an image: first metaphor! The image is then imitated by a sound: second metaphor! And each time there is a complete leap from one sphere into the heart of another, new sphere...We believe that when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers, we have knowledge of the things themselves, and yet we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities. ³

The idea that “nothing can be known or communicated” seems a little extreme and ambiguous. Relative terms such as hard, cold, heavy, slow, fast, etc., are just that: relative and to be taken into context. I would agree that “hard” in and of itself does not exist; there is no perfect, ideal, hardness from which all hard things come. Ideas of perfection within a species or group are the fallacy of the ideal. The perfect human or perfect dog does not lie waiting for its comparison to other imperfect forms of dogs or human beings on earth. The rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value is something that has happened throughout history and can be said to define characteristics of certain epochs. Recognizing my own adherence to current systems of

order is merely an acknowledgement of the difficulty in trying to overthrow the status quo. Any disagreement with current standards or systems of belief have not led me personally to radical acts of defiance. The fear of punishment has been too great for me to believe in any philosophy so much as to risk my life or livelihood for a particular cause. Nonetheless, I still maintain my own systems of defiance and protest within the acceptable political and social structures. The importance in discussing this is to realize that the adherence to these political systems, structures, and institutions is mostly the result of familiarity and indoctrination. Taking as an example a current and uncomfortable topic, pedophilia, we can examine superficially the relationship between a societal construction of stages of a human being and the meaning it creates. First, the concept of what constitutes a “child” and the responsibilities thereof has changed significantly from the early industrial period to the current postmodern. Children who were made to engage in assisting the family economic structure through intensive “adult” labor would now be considered abused, and the parents or company deemed unlawful. Marriage among girls that we now consider “underage” was fairly common in earlier times, but by today’s standards would be considered criminal and frowned upon. The main point of this is that the age of the child remains the same, but developments in knowledge, health, life span improvement, industrialization, etc., has created a change and new philosophy of the child versus the adult and the responsibilities therein. I am a product of this indoctrination and have no attraction to young children of any sex, but I can still nonetheless say that if circumstances were such that a similar culture existed where the acceptability of what we call pedophilia was permissible it would surely be the case that the level of participation in this act would be as normal as other social
phenomena that are acceptable today. The main point is that while I agree with the restrictions and illegality with this act, I do so largely because I am part of the herd that believes it is wrong, because of my indoctrination and not because of some a priori knowledge of the criminality of the act in and of itself. Lastly, in this second definition of nihilism, the belief “that the destruction of existing political or social institutions is necessary for future improvement,” is one to which I do not ascribe. The idea of “improvement” is subjective and relative to the one advocating the institution’s destruction. For example, if the current political system promoted the right of an individual to indiscriminately kill another, this can still be viewed as “good” to those who see the human race as necessitating an outlet for its own expedited destruction. Undoubtedly, political and social institutions will change and there will always be dissenting factions of any current political thought and practice; but to say that one is an “improvement” over another, seems to defeat the purpose of a nihilistic viewpoint. The change is made because some party or some person willed it so. Propaganda may state that an overthrow is an improvement, but in terms of pure reason, this assertion cannot be held as true one way or another, without constructing a fundamental good, which in itself cannot be truly justified as truth, but merely as a choice for a way to live.

The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* states:

nihilism, ethical. See RELATIVISM.
nihilism, philosophical. See NIETZSCHE, RUSSIAN NIHILSIM.
nihilism, semantic. See SEMANTIC HOLISM.

Let us examine briefly what this dictionary states about each one of these headings. First, relativism is defined as:

the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths. There are two main types, *cognitive* and *ethical*. Cognitive relativism holds that there are no
universal truths about the world: the world has no intrinsic characteristics; there are just different ways of interpreting it. The Greek Sophist Protagoras, the first person on record to hold such a view, said, “Man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not....” [Richard] Rorty says, e.g., “that ‘objective truth’ is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on.” Critics of cognitive relativism contend that it is self-referentially incoherent, since it presents its statements as universally true, rather than simply relatively so.4

To say that there are no universal truths automatically asserts a universal truth that thereby contradicts its own assertion. But we should realize that the inability of language to escape the shortcomings of its fundamental self-referentiality should not in this instance be grounds for dismissing this claim. This, I think is a fault of the construction of language. To refer to the fact that something “is not universally so” leaves us with this cyclical trap that prevents us from referring to what we mean to say; in other words, the syntactical structure of that sentence cannot fully communicate what is meant, because there is not a system of communication or word outside of the language which would satisfy the claim that there are no universal truths.

Ethical relativism is the theory that there are no universally valid moral principles: all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice. There are two subtypes: conventionalism, which holds that moral principles are valid relative to the conventions of a given culture or society; and subjectivism, which maintains that individual choices are what determine the validity of a moral principle. Its motto is, Morality lies in the eyes of the beholder. Ernest Hemingway wrote, “So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.” 5

This statement reflects my thoughts about recognizing the inherent relativism in current taboo behaviors. Realizing that I choose not to carry out some of these behaviors belies my own adherence to a deeply engrained morality. When the opportunity comes about to question a current standard or law that I feel is particularly important or in

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5 Ibid.
disagreement with my worldview, then taking calculated actions whether in protest, active defiance (engaging in the act knowing the consequences), or any other method, allows me to manifest my dissent with the comfort of knowing that a morality is of my own making; my own will.

The application of this philosophy allows the artist the freedom to engage in creating things that question the sacred and holy, the mores and folkways of a particular culture and conventional thought. Value judgments that result as an effect of witnessing or experiencing said artistic creation are an essential quality or characteristic although not necessarily the only feature and purpose for the art.

Lastly, from Karen Carr’s *The Banalization of Nihilism*, we have five detailed descriptions of the variants of nihilism:

1. **Epistemological nihilism** is the denial of the possibility of knowledge. It is sometimes expressed with the claim, “All knowledge claims are equal.” Or it may be expressed as, “Every knowledge claim is equally (un)justified.” Epistemological nihilists think that no standards exist for distinguishing warranted from unwarranted belief, or knowledge from error. Although similar to skepticism in many regards, there are some important differences.  

This definition of nihilism entails some problematic statements. The belief that ALL knowledge claims are equally justified or unjustified feigns luminosity into epistemological endeavors. For example, to take as a subject, say, a modern composer and assert that one of the characteristics of his work XYZ has within it grave political statements on the evils of consumerism, while the piece contains program notes that state exactly what the intentions of the piece are and what the work is about, say, the virgin birth of Jesus, would be a claim of knowledge that one can say is unjustified. However, one may point out that the validity of the composer’s notes is still

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questionable. The only method for distinguishing his intention would be to decide how much or how feasible any particular interpretation of the artistic artifact is. The claim of any knowledge of fact or plausibility varies in the degree of truth or probability to the subject at hand. But, what the author is taking into consideration are claims of Truth and absolute knowledge. Epistemologists continue to debate the scope and limits of knowledge. The proponents of a skeptical epistemology refer to one of the most difficult, the problem of the criterion, a version of which has been stated by the sixteenth-century skeptic Montaigne:

To adjudicate [between the true and the false] among the appearances of things, we need to have a distinguishing method; to validate this method, we need to have a justifying argument; but to validate this justifying argument, we need the very method at issue. And there we are, going round on the wheel.  

The issue at hand is not the validity of particulars, but of knowledge and thinking in and of itself. Admittedly, this issue is more complex and epistemology deals with all sorts of methods and theories for calculating the plausibility of particular statements of fact. The point of the paper is not to get entangled in any one of these descriptions of nihilism, but to briefly shed a bit of light on each one in order to define how nihilism will be used herein.

*Alethiological nihilism* is the denial of the reality of truth, usually expressed by the claim, “There is no truth.” If knowledge is taken to be justified true belief, then alethiological nihilism entails epistemological nihilism; without truth, there can be no knowledge. If, however, knowledge is understood differently (for example, as the beliefs deemed legitimate by a community of discourse), then one can be nihilistic about truth but not about knowledge. Note that one can hold a theory of truth—an account of what it would take for a proposition to be considered true—and believe that it is impossible to satisfy the necessary conditions (i.e. be an alethiological nihilist). 

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Metaphysical or ontological nihilism is the denial of an (independently existing) world, expressed in the claim, “Nothing is real.” If one holds a correspondence theory of truth, then metaphysical nihilism entails alethiological nihilism; if there is no world for one’s beliefs to correspond to or to be about, then no true belief is possible. One could hold a coherence theory of truth, however, and be a metaphysical nihilist, since in coherence theories of truth the world is irrelevant to the truth of belief. 9

Statements two and three seem to be interrelated. The definitions argue the basis of establishing whether or not truth actually exists, claiming that any world of forms or of perfection (truth) is false. Alethiological nihilism distinguishes itself by the contingency it places on what is defined as truth and the definition of knowledge. For Carr, if a community legitimizes knowledge or culture through discourse then one may still maintain a nihilistic outlook on truth yet remain faithful in acquiring knowledge. This holds true only in situations where the knowledge is not deemed justified, but rather accepted and validated by the respective institutions. The recognition of the inherent relativism of the knowledge allows one the comfort of being able to hold on to knowledge but still deny the plausibility of an absolute truth. The third definition by Carr suggests that in metaphysical or ontological nihilism the only world that is verifiable is the world that corresponds to our senses. Ideas of perfection, heaven, forms, pure knowledge, etc., are merely constructs of the human mind. Gianni Vattimo makes an interesting observation, stating “metaphysics is never anything more than the expression of a subjective vision of the world, a sort of autobiography of its author, but formulated in terms more abstract than those of poetry.” 10 In the philosophical realm we are said to be in a transitory state of affairs with regard to truth, knowledge, worldviews, and history (to name just a few). Vattimo, in explaining this situation

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9 Ibid
summarizes what a previous philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey stated in his essay The
Essence of Philosophy.

Dilthey observed that in every epoch of the history of ideas there have occurred
moments of profound transformation, in which it was no longer possible to
comprehend the altered conditions of existence from within the prevailing
systems; at such moments there arise nonsystematic, more free and "subjective"
forms of thought, which Dilthey called “philosophies of life." 11

Vattimo further summarizes that:

during periods of “transition,” philosophy becomes aware that it is only the
formulation of a subjective Weltanschauung; that is all it ever is, but the rest of
the time it does not know it. We have come to realize that this is the nature of
philosophy precisely because we are living in a time of transition, or in what we
have now learned to call post modernity. 12

To observe ourselves in this particular period in the West, we recognize that there is a
decline of the idea that there is a “unitary significance and direction to the history of
mankind.” 13 Along with this, one may observe that the ideas of art and creation have
taken on different meanings. There is a fascinating point of reflection that we in the 21st
century are privileged to take part. Through information accessibility, technological
developments and faster access to different and varying worldviews, a case can be
made for the argument that art is in the stay of grappling yet again for an understanding
of purpose, and the realization that there may not be any. Theories of aesthetics and
beauty are in actuality representations of the subjective mind within a culture, which
always contains the limitations of time and space.

*Ethical or moral nihilism* is the denial of the reality of moral or ethical values,
expressed in the claim “There is no Good” or “All ethical claims are equally valid.”
An ethical or moral nihilist does not deny that people use moral or ethical terms;

11 Ibid, 22.
12 Ibid, 23.
the claim is rather that these terms refer to nothing more than the bias or taste of the assertor.14

This classification of nihilism is particularly interesting to me. I recognize the intention of affirming the relativism of cultural claims as to what constitutes morality, the positive and negative characteristics. To say that there is no “Good” states that the absolute quality of “Good” is nowhere to be found in the world. Any reliance on absolutes seems to always be an appeal to authority, which history has shown to change quite dramatically as different societies dominated their respective times. This explanation of ethical nihilism fits in well with the prior dictionary definitions. Realizing one’s cultural bias when asserting the value of ethical claims seems to be more of an academic exercise rather than a real attempt to revalue existing standards of morality. In other words, recognition is the first step to change and revaluing, but only the first step in a long process. To state that the existence of absolutes like goodness, rightness, or particular ethical systems are essentially unchanging fundamental qualities of the universe is to imply that the universe exists for the purpose of mankind. In other words, attempts at establishing a system of ethics as an unchanging, fundamental truth, which in itself suggests a responsibility of maintaining continuity is a coping mechanism. This idea gives a sense of purpose and continuity, which would serve to engulf us like the warm blanket of “purpose and progress” which would keep us comfortable in the cold, vapid space of nothingness (or non-perception). Creating fairy-tales of otherworldly riches or states of being that would serve to imbue us with closure (which is essentially additional knowledge or the unmasking of what was previously unknown) fails to realize that there are some things that will never be clearly understood.

14 Karen Carr, 18.
Existential or axiological nihilism is the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment, ‘Life has no meaning,’…this is probably the most commonplace sense of the word.  

Existential nihilism was my first foray into the concept of nihilism. If one holds true to some of the basic tenants of nihilism — that the world is chaotic, without meaning, divinity, etc. — then it may be true that a sense of pointlessness follows. This is what is commonly referred to as an incomplete nihilism — incomplete because it constitutes the first stages of realization to the makeup of the human mind and its historical drive to create meaning out of the individual and respective tribe (tribal in centuries past, to a more global awareness now). Usually the individual who subscribes to the feelings of helplessness, anger, emptiness, and frustration has yet to accept or acknowledge the constructs of the human mind from ideas, institutions and culture. If nihilism could be described as something that develops in stages, this would certainly be the first stage of interaction and development. Life seems pointless only in relation to an overarching outside entity or imposed purpose. To me, life has meaning because of the values that I place upon it and myself. Highly influenced by my cultural upbringing, I will, statistically speaking, most likely adhere to the ideas of my cultural, demographic, and socio-economic class. As one becomes more informed of the stimuli used to influence (some may say control and manipulate) my thoughts and outlook, it becomes more of a responsibility to make sure that what I do and believe correspond to the actuality of what my physiological propensities drive me to desire. Examination of the self becomes more than an academic exercise and more of a jumping off point for the revaluation of values as well as the establishment and possible promulgation of new ideas, laws, moralities, and ethics.

\[15\] Ibid, 17-18.
Summary and Reflection

In summation, the aforementioned definitions and examples of the varieties of nihilism fail to provide a simple “dictionary” definition of the term or concept. The concept of nihilism is malleable and can be applied to a variety of situations and contexts. There are common elements that run throughout each definition though, mainly that of the Latin root of the word, nihil, nothing. The curious problem of language construction hits us in the face when trying to define this nothingness and an application therein. Because nothingness is something of a void, an emptiness, something that is lacking, we cannot say that nothing exists, much in the same way we cannot say, “there are no absolutes.” There is a contradiction in the semantics and construction of the sentence because of the self-referentiality of our language. However, we do have some vague sense of what we mean to say, even though we lack the ability to describe such a concept adequately. The artist dwells in this space of ambiguity and of nothingness when she creates against the grain, and remains aware of the process of self-discovery through creation. For although past experiences may lead him to this point, there is still a degree of uncertainty and an abyss that she must face.

Before moving on to complete and incomplete nihilism, and finally the formulation of a philosophy of art, it is important to relay to the reader how nihilism relates to art. For the moment let us regain or reestablish the motives behind this investigation.

So far, an attempt has been made to distinguish the variants of nihilistic thought through the comparison of definitions heretofore. It is important to remind ourselves that by acknowledging that the fundamental qualities of the human experience are those of change, destruction, fallibility, and imperfect perception of our world through
language and the senses, we find that the arguments for absolutes (of beauty, purpose, goals, concepts) are always available for the human to shape to his liking, particularly so when it goes against established norms or normative claims. For the artist that resides in this world, it can be said that one of the roles she must play is that of confronting the multitude of perspectives regarding aesthetics and philosophies of purpose and intent.
Nihilism: Complete and Incomplete

To ascertain a completed nihilism, the recognition and insistence of the interpretive characteristics of human thought and revaluation of values remain essential. When an inventory of the different types of metaphysical endeavors of great thinkers is considered and reflected upon, we do not simply gain contradictory assertions that fall into polemical realms, sometimes assumed to be infallible, but the intention of this historical reflection of philosophical thought can be regarded as an attempt to come closer to a total knowledge of the world. For looking at the historical thought of mankind yields the poetics of creativity and his attempts at understanding. Considering the world of art and creation, the parallels can be drawn quite easily. The manifestation of any work of art is the direct result of the human beings attempt at a reconciliation of being and the temporal qualities associated with it. Because one must go through stages of intention when creating art, i.e. desire, idea, planning, creation/execution, and most importantly the pronouncement (of the object as art), there is an immediate connection with the individuals understanding of the world and the perception of it.

The complete nihilist seeks to overcome vices that preclude the attainment of human potential. This may not be different than any number of philosophies that seek “perfection” or an attainment of excellence. The one distinguishing quality of nihilism is that the fundamental aspect of this philosophy is tied to a constant revaluation of values and the recognition of the inescapable relativism of any belief system, including the one promulgated by the subject, or artist. The awareness of being and time, and relativism of the social systems of the past and present bring one to the crux of deliberation and intention of creativity in that what matters most is not capturing the extrinsic effects of
creation such as fame, awards, money, job positions, etc. — but of the process and the act itself. The complete form of nihilism engages with the unknown, the grey area, the ambiguities of the human experience and time. Most importantly, the complete nihilist acknowledges that in order to survive in this world one still has to step back from the abyss and adhere to a metaphysics that chooses to avoid such questions as meaningless. Either way, complete nihilism moves past the “troubling” notion that the human being and his experience are nothing more than an immediate obscurity occurring at all times. This belief, of course, comes not from the limited scope and view of the human in his lifetime or in actual “real” measurable terms, such as generations, centuries, thousands of years but from the scope of the existence of objects and things within the universal time. For who can really grasp what is meant by a million years of existence, a billion years, quadrillion, or even the concept of infinity (rather than the superficial understanding of an unending, “forever-ness”) in terms of the human experience? The complete nihilist is aware of these concepts at all times and formulates his thoughts and actions with this in mind.

The complete nihilist places emphasis on restructuring the world in which she lives as one that corresponds to the values that she holds. Additionally, she views “eternal recurrence,” not as the hyperbolic example of the universe literally repeating every event exactly, ad nauseam, ad infinitum; but rather as a compelling gesture to get one to affirm life, to be aware of time and the world as it is, without appealing to authority whether transcendental, divine, or manmade, and to distance ourselves from any teleological view of the cosmos.
The incomplete or negative nihilist takes the superficial, one-dimensional, façade of the implications of this philosophy. The weak nihilist views the ‘death of god’ as a crisis and a void rather than as an opportunity for emancipation. The first steps of this incomplete nihilism is the realization that a history of dogmatic practices aimed at the supernatural and suprasensory have brought us time and time again to a quagmire; the most recent being the hegemony imposed by the West onto other cultures, peoples, and lands. This was partly to remain the beacon of light that illuminated the way towards a universalistic goal and to finally bring about the favor and riches of God among the nation proclaiming it so. The problem with the incomplete nihilist is that she stops short, seeing no viable way to solve this repetitive cycle of play between the master and slave; whereas the accomplished nihilist, the complete nihilist, studies the thoughts of any given culture and looks beyond the constraints of moments in time being absolute truths in time and eternity. It is the mere recognition that one is always becoming and searching to become what they essentially are.

Hermeneutics is the thought of accomplished nihilism, thought that aims to reconstruct rationality in the wake of the death of God and opposes any current of negative nihilism, in other words the desperation of those who continue to cultivate a sense of mourning because "religion is no more." 16

Adopting the complete form of nihilism in art is an almost inescapable quality of the history of art itself. In art there is no “right and wrongs”; things merely are. The product of the artist is judged according to many criteria that are completely dependent upon their place in any given social context. But the history of art lives outside of these constraints and presupposes its own sovereignty through the mere fact that the object in

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question must be proclaimed as “art” to at least one other human being besides the subject proclaiming it so.

Incomplete nihilism is a reactionary gesture of abandonment. In his mind, it is complete as it stands, there is nothing further to do or examine. Feelings of apathy and angst are common features and the most common understanding of the term. The incomplete nihilist understands the inherent construct of ‘absolutes’ but fails to explore the genealogy of the various moralities in order that she may understand the culmination of the present as it relates to various historical phenomena. What occurs with the full adoption of negative nihilism is that the slippery slope of hopelessness, absolutes, and the appeal to authority sneak in.

The tragic pose is often a prelude to a ‘leap of faith’ (which thus becomes a leap into pure irrationality, a surrender to the dogmatic authoritarianism of churches, central committees, charismatic leaders), and sometimes it is just a way of clinging to the pure and simple awareness that ‘there are no answers,’ with the tacit Socratic presumption that it is better at any rate to know that you do not know.  

Weak nihilism is the “last man’s” guide to living. The weak nihilist does not worry or concern himself with matters that require thought or energy, she merely needs to satiate the creature comforts available to him:

One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one sees to it that the entertainment is not a strain. One no longer becomes poor and rich: both are too burdensome. Who wants to rule anymore? Who wants to obey anymore? Both are too burdensome. No shepherd and one herd! Each wants the same, each is the same, and whoever feels differently goes voluntarily into the insane asylum. “Formerly the whole world was insane”—the finest ones say, blinking. One is clever and knows everything that has happened, and so there is no end to their mockery. People still quarrel but they reconcile quickly—otherwise it is bad for the stomach. One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one honors health. “We invented happiness” say the last human beings, and they blink… “Give us this last human being, oh Zarathustra—

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17 Ibid, xvii.
make us into these last human beings! Then we will make you a gift of the overman!!” 18

The incomplete nihilist dwells in the space of hopelessness. Putting his hands in the air and declaring the absurdity of living, he fails to move his mind outside the possibility of creating for himself a world in which he is aware of the abyss, of life without meaning. Both the complete and incomplete nihilist are stepping back into a metaphysical realm, the only difference being that the complete nihilist is aware of the inherent relativism of his worldview and values and also of the existence of the concept of arbitrariness and nothingness that imposes itself upon him.

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A Formulation for a Philosophy of Art

In order to formulate a nihilistic philosophy of art, we should be aware that there are three specific things that we must take into consideration; namely, (1) what constitutes art; (2) the role of the artist; and (3) how these relate to nihilism. It will be necessary to diffuse the most common assumption that works whose main focus is on despair, violence, isolation, or other superficial, common understandings of the nihilistic dilemma (see incomplete nihilism). While such pieces may give some insight into what nihilism can mean, it is still an incomplete form of the philosophy. Additionally, different schools of thought can be considered nihilistic at the core, such as, the Dadaist movement. Through the subversive qualities inherent within the movement to overthrow and destroy the existing standards of aesthetics and conceptions of beauty, Dadaism can be considered nihilistic by some definitions. However, as already mentioned previously in this essay, this is but one possible outlook and interpretation of nihilism. The basic point is that nihilism and art are more than superficial clichés brought about by common understandings of those respective terms; one should not point to these examples as exemplars of nihilistic art.

Adopting a completed nihilistic viewpoint (from here on referred to as simply 'nihilism') allows the artist to safely rest in the comfort that his creation must not adhere to any particular principle of social acceptance. This approach does not address the aesthetics of the creation itself or the creative process. We recognize the different tiers that are placed upon any discipline or art; within each subset, there are still degrees of mastery. When I refer to the “artist” I mean one who is human, has consciousness, and proclaims at least one object in the world as possessing the signifier of “art.” This
includes any object that he recognizes, whether pre-existing or discovered, or one that he actually manufactures. Again, this definition of “art” and “artist” does not take into consideration the changing cultural aesthetic. This definition is merely one that aims at being inclusive for the sake of acknowledging that art is fundamentally a relationship of signifying objects as such. Art should be thought of as an object, which submits to the naming by a person. The only exception in this case can be another person who does not wish to consider herself a piece of art. Even if the tyranny of the majority forces the this label upon her, the fact that this individual being thus labeled can proclaim her own sovereignty, or define herself as non-art, excludes her from this relationship of submission. That is to say, legitimately naming an object without protest from the thing being named, implies power. If the object being named cannot think or disagree with its definition or value as such, then the power in the relationship belongs to the one naming. Usually these circumstances apply to creators upon their creations, or inanimate things. Even if we name a child, most all develop the capacity to refute the action of naming and essentially the power structure. Otherwise, art is the submissive, accepting, verifiable object whose existence depends entirely on the ostensive proclamation of the human being. Any disagreement regarding the talent of the one proclaiming any and every object a work of art falls into the arena of aesthetics and is not an argument that this paper will investigate. Instead, the focus remains with clarifying how art exists in discovery, proclamation, and the process of manufacturing and verification.

All artists are social beings. This socialization can happen proactively, as when the artist takes the initiative to express and display art; or reactively, as a necessary or
compelling response to some significant event. But art is not art unless there is a receptor for the stimuli. If the only observer is the artist himself it is only an act of creation, but fails to realize itself as a piece of art. By exposing the effect of the creative act to at least one other person, the creative act then transcends to “art.” What becomes of this hypothetical human being who is said to have created art but for which no verification, no documentation of his lucubration exists? If the artist creates but exposes his work to no one else, to the extent that he destroys any remnant or trace of his creative endeavors before he dies, then nothing has actually been created except for the possibility of a creation, which could be fiction or myth. In this regard, “art” is simply more than creating — there must be recognition and sharing with at least one other; otherwise it is merely a hermetical game waiting to be actualized and revealed as art. This being the case, the fact that art is something that dwells in the public domain — the creative act framed and intended as such — means that art is itself a social act.

The artist is constantly bombarded with art wherever he resides. His view of the world is not merely superficial but constantly receptive and sensitive to the phenomena of the world. His task is to construct something meaningful with those things he has received, experienced, and digested, relating them to what is internal within himself that corresponds to, counteracts, negates, affirms, etc., the world outside himself. Part of this interaction deals with the social constructs of the human being and the human experience as both an individual and a group understanding the world. The true artist creates with his available palette of tools and the rare actualized master states something powerful to many. But with the powerful statement, there is usually some breaking with or speaking out for or against a particular condition or phenomena of the
human experience. There does not need to be a simple one-to-one relationship between the art and what it is trying to express; there can be a multitude of perspectives and interpretations of the act, and therein lies some of the beauty. Viewing such works as Picasso’s *Guernica*, photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, or listening to music by such composers as J.S. Bach, Meredith Monk, John Cage, Igor Stravinsky, and Helmut Lachenmann, a realization of the diversity of expression and manifestation of this inner drive to create serves as proof and validation of the complex, labyrinthine reflection and representational characteristic of the human experience. We can certainly expand this rationale into other fields such as film, architecture, literature, dance, and others. What allows for such diversity is the inherent reassessment of values that constantly takes place in art and is almost inseparable from the creative act or the meaning of the piece.

So what allows for this changing interpretive, open-ended exploration? It is the fact that art is nihilistic at its core. It will seek to heal, to enrage, to educate, to disgust, to pontificate, to express and to represent in some way an intention of the artist. This applies not only to art in the 20th century but throughout history. The historical trend of creation is to introduce a new interpretation of existence, a new representation, approached with new eyes, ears, language, and mind; such changes in interpretation may occur gradually or abruptly. There are no absolutes in this field, only context and interpretation. The existence of any hierarchical dissemination of information — that is, of which field of art first informs the other or the social nature of the human being and the creative act which involves the emotive side of the human— consistently challenge and change our interpretation of the world.
Refraining from the use of the term “progress” is emphatically intentional. Although informed by history, the passage of time does not guarantee or necessitate that a given idea will improve, realize a goal or progress to some ideal state. Like politics, the pendulum swings continually back and forth, resting for moments at a time on any given locus of interpretation. The past informs us and exposes us to ways of viewing and interpreting the world. The possibility of remanufacturing, appropriating, deconstructing, or applying any of these or other interpretive gestures to the historical artifacts connects the artist to a lineage of creative individuals while also establishing a presence in this historical playground.

Art can aptly be described as the creative manifestation of the emotive forces intrinsic to the human experience. Sometimes art is intended to represent or express a specific thing. In this sense it can be used as language; that is, there are signs, symbols, and a structure that the artist and his audience understand. However, as with language, what is said or communicated superficially is not always the true meaning. Sometimes there are subtleties that can only be understood by those who are informed. Like language, art can possess hidden meanings and a concealment, intentional or not, of the subconscious or the inadvertent. Even the artist may not always be aware of the multitude of layers that may exist or be gleaned from the work at hand:

When different languages are set alongside one another it becomes clear that, where words are concerned, what matters is never truth, never the full and adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages. The ‘thing-in-itself’ (which would be, precisely, pure truth, truth without consequences) is impossible for even the creator of language to grasp, and indeed this is not at all desirable. 19

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The theme of the interpretive nature of nihilism and art is clearly evident here. Inevitably cast with one another, the created thing, the art, is not the thing-in-itself but a representation of will. The spoken intention of the artist may shape the audience’s interpretation of the work; but even then, underlying, clandestine motivations unbeknownst to the artist may be apparent to others. That an artist wishes to intentionally frame a work in order to receive a more or less predictable response does not guarantee that the result will be so forthcoming.

If you could imagine dissonance assuming human form—and what else is man?—this dissonance would need, to be able to live, a magnificent illusion which would spread a veil of beauty over its own nature. This is the true artistic aim of Apollo, in whose name we gather together all those countless illusions of beautiful semblance which, at every moment, make existence at all worth living at every moment and thereby urge us on to experience the next.  

According to Nietzsche, the idea and the aesthetics of beauty are intertwined with emotion. For what we perceive as beautiful invariably strikes a sentient chord within the human and most of the time induces some sense of happiness, enjoyment, sorrow, etc. The dissonance underlying the human experience provides the palette from which the artist creates and one may find thematic elements within the piece, which contains a ratio of various emotive qualities working together. Even the so-called “abstract” or “absolute” art, which aims at separating itself from mere representation, still maintains a semblance of rhythm, space, force, color, frequency, etc, that ineluctably displays the subjective, interpretive, characteristics of the human being. Looking at Jackson Pollock’s *Silver Over Black, White, Yellow and Red* one observes the lack of an identifiable narrative within this structure. Even the title suggests a neutrality and avoidance of narrative. However, the force of the strokes, the textural foreground,

20 Ibid, 115.
background, and middle-ground, the rhythmic pulsations, the use of space (a de-emphasis of hierarchical importance depending on the spatial view and perspective), the colors and frequencies show a story, albeit an interpretive one, removed from the one-on-one transparent correlation of prior centuries, into the ambiguities of the multiplicities of meaning and interpretation. Admittedly, I’m drawn to art that is more in tune with art for its own sake, and prefer to create without dependence upon a story or extra-musical meaning; rather, I prefer that the art be experienced as an event bereft of my own intentions (unconscious or not) and received as the gesture in itself. But no matter how much the artist intends a neutrality of expression or the absoluteness of the art, the work is still human, and traceable to the apparatus of a conscious, inquisitive, emotive, malleable human being. In essence, the whole realm of art incites the participants to interact with the world of representation as creator, receptor, and interpreter. Art is nothing more than the moment captured. Forms, length, tools, material, etc., vary widely in the pursuit of trying to communicate self-actualization and yearning for some understanding. When you take into account all of the points of what is considered art — public domain (artist plus at least one other person), appropriation of the art into our own world and the ability for the public to interpret and use as it likes — Nietzsche’s words still resonate today:

And we men of today still master this art all too well, despite all of your good will toward the day and staying awake. It is quite enough to love, to hate, to desire, simply to feel—and right away the spirit and power of the dream overcome us, and with our eyes open, coldly contemptuous of all danger, we climb up on the most hazardous paths to scale the roofs and spires of fantasy—without any sense of dizziness, as if we had been born to climb, we somnambulists of the

21 Assuming the reader acknowledges the presence of multiple interpretations, there will not be an in-depth interpretation of this painting in the present paper, but an understanding that experts in the field of painting, aesthetics, interpretation and art history have provided much scholarship on this subject and style of expression.
day! We artists! We ignore what is natural. We are moonstruck and god-struck. We wander, still as death, unwearied, on heights that we do not see as heights but as plains, as our safety.  

In summation, the relationship between nihilism and the artist is seemingly inseparable. I concede the existence of those artists within the various fields that hold on to tradition and want nothing to do with “new/modern” art but would rather study, perform, replicate and sustain those practices and viewpoints of the historical. This paper is not concerned with such a viewpoint. I seek to explore the qualities of the subset of artists that belong to the “modern” movement of any particular age. I mean to involve only those that choose to take the prior knowledge of the past and shape, vary, create, and interpret something fresh and new. The saving grace of the present moment, of postmodernity, lies not in exact mimicry of the past, but in the awareness and of the responsibility of the mind to encapsulate itself within its own epoch and that take into account the social context in which it lives and interacts. The reassessment of values is constantly taking place for the modern artist; by this she continuously ignites the synapses of her mind and the creative, inquisitive and interpretive actions so that she remains alive, sharp, introspective, challenged and constantly in touch with herself and the unknown.

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Bibliography


PART II
TWO PERSONAL PIECES
Err Prenne

The question was brought up as to how the previous philosophical insight has influenced the piece, *Err Prenne*, composed in conjunction with the thesis. The fact is that there is not necessarily any direct, one to one correlation between any part of the video or audio and any philosophical premise. Instead, the composition is largely gestural and abstract, largely based on the “moment” and fully experiencing the effects stemming from the stimulation of the visual, aural, and environment in space and time. This work may be considered absolute on certain levels in that it mainly investigates polyrhythmic textures, space, and the contrapuntal relationships that exist between images and sound. There is essentially no narrative or extra-musical element that it is trying to reference or supplement. One will notice the elements of pacing, speed, and motion inherent in the various sonic and visual gestures. Loosely, my own intentions or take on the composition are that of the influence of the moment, of Being, death, nihilism, and rebirth.

*Err Prenne* is a signifier and a referent to the various experiences one has when listening to and viewing this piece. The title itself is meaningless, unless you consider that it represents only one thing in this universe: this two channel audio and video piece. The title is largely an affirmation of the creative process and the uniqueness inherent in it.

As to why these particular words and spelling were chosen, this was simply the result of my aural aesthetic. That is, I wanted a title that sounded like it could have meaning, and I also wanted a soft, almost magical phrase. One would agree that if the piece were named *Gooby Dooby* or any number of things, the interpretation could be drastically different.
Hologram

for two channel audio, video (three screens), and live interaction (two people)

A semiological examination of the human experience through the purposeful and intentional juxtaposition of strong, emotive, representational artifacts.

Proposal

The purpose of this project is to examine the reactive nature of the human being in a particular society. Taking advantage of the liberties afforded, the project attempts to take a critical look at the social and philosophical constructs that are dealt with on a daily basis.

The social aspect will focus on the “herd” mentality and the philosophical will focus on our values as being relative and not absolute.

It is my contention that there are no real, absolute values that are intrinsically given to the human being. All values and morals are the fashionable and agreed upon constructs of any particular age (i.e. the herd mentality).

It is no wonder why our current generation is not offended in the slightest by the defamation or renunciation of defunct ancient societies and belief systems. There is hardly anyone who is offended by a slur against any non-existent sect. Their importance and cultural relevance is null (or very insignificant).

The attempt here then, is to make one aware of the following, through representation and signifiers:

1) History is not progressive and not linear.
   
   - We are not more insightful, moral, “better” overall than other past societies. We will be forgotten, misunderstood and misrepresented by the inheritors of our records. Our symbols, signs, and meanings will become hard to decipher as the new ones take their place and as language and representation changes accordingly.
   
   - Although we can find things that we prefer to live with/without, fundamentally and philosophically, the herd has not changed, there has not been a major paradigm shift in the fundamentals of human thought, goal and action. Unilateral histories have not been reached nor will they ever.
   
   - Human beings still think and react fundamentally the same to stimuli present at their respective time and place. Therefore, assigning value
and becoming arbiters of the aesthetic and philosophical is purely subjective and never objective.

2) This being the case, we must recognize our own fallibility and relativistic philosophies in relation to the historical which is always occurring. Although, it might seem impossible to break free from the conditions of habitual thought, it is important to realize their temporal qualities.

3) The attempt then, is made to procure examples of two seemingly morally opposing phenomena and place them as closely as possible both spatially and temporally. We are trying to witness just one aspect of the inconsistency of our philosophy and embrace just one of the many dualities that exist among the human experience. (This may indeed replicate the Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic in some way)

4) The examples will be that of the ritualistic elements of the profane and sacred. The two opposing stimulants will be that of the church ritual (communal, holy, pure, godly, white, clean, forgiven, saved, the “right” side, god’s side) and that of pornography (isolated, private, anti-social, seedy, underground, dark, disturbing, other, the tolerated, vice, black, the “wrong” side).

Artistic Meaning

There are several elements involved in the creation of this piece:

1) Risk/Fear
   - My physiological makeup (for better or worse) has always been to “know” particular things and to “know myself.” Artistically, I am on journey to know what fear is, to know what darkness is, to take certain risks that I see as valuable and educational even though these acts may be entirely bereft of pleasure and reward.

   - I can disassociate myself and abstract the signifiers for what they are, so in this context there is no value placed on either this idea of the “sacred” or “profane,” if only for this moment.

2) Awareness of my insignificance and of my own death.

   - The artist must be aware of her limited time as a human being with consciousness. He therefore must try and manifest his authenticity through creative acts which question his own self and importance in the larger playing field of the arts and extending all the way to humanity. The recognition of his struggle, failures and successes are only learning points before the time is up.
3) The idea of altered states

- While the audience is engaged in witnessing this state of being, it is highly likely that they have never experienced these two phenomena on the same occasion. The idea is that one may enter the sacred on a given time and place, perform the rituals of transformation/forgiveness and slowly (or at some pace) “digress” into sin and vice and necessitate the following/upcoming ritual for purification. Never in my experience have the two been combined as a singularity, one point in time. This altered state brings meaning to the inconsistency of the human being but also the beauty of the human experience. The questions asked are:

- Can we disassociate ourselves, if only for a moment, from the imposed cultural influence and recognize ourselves as merely sentient beings who have cleverly constructed these meanings to which we are (for the most part) slavishly tied?

- Can we further examine the emotive forces, which come from these signifiers? What we see is not what is, but merely a representation of something we can only grapple with, especially so for the layman or non-specialist.
Hologram (2009), Brian Hernandez
For two channel tape and video, two live performers, three video screens, live diffusion.