

The sublime readdressed

We tend to talk about art as a recognizable phenomenon with a content or appearance we call art. From time to time we see people from the ignorant masses, people with little knowledge of, or contact with art, raising their voices in protest against something that has entered the art scene. It could be pile of books, and not just any books but bibles set on fire by an artist in an art show context of some kind. Normally some people will protest, condemn the action, and some of the angriest may even claim that this isn't art. Whereas we, who know the art world better, know that this is art. Something makes this particular fire a work of art along with paintings by Vermeer, sculptures by Henry Moor, installations by Jessica Stockholder etc.

The question is of course: what is it that connects such different practices? Or perhaps we must ask if we are talking about phenomena that have so little in common that we actually deal with totally different things. Does a Rothko painting have anything in common with the imagined work, the burning Bibles, apart from the fact that they both appear in the art world?

Arthur Danto and others will argue that the concept of art that prevailed from the 18th century and throughout the time of modernism is over. That concept has lost its credibility, - it rests on a faith that we no longer can hold. So therefore the book *After the end of art* (Danto 1997).

Whenever I read text that proclaim the end of art or that we now have a new paradigm, Danto and others, I tend to find the argument very convincing. I have to admit that. On the other hand I also must admit that I keep on working in my studio as if nothing had happened, as if it is meaningful to try to bring into the world more paintings based on the same ambitions that Mark Rothko held in the 60ies. And then again I must admit that I live with a paradox.

A common description of how this all ended will see Modernism as an end game. In painting the process unfolded as a struggle towards flatness. The question for Clement Greenberg, the key figure in defining what was interesting and irrelevant, was what is it that this form of art, say painting, is alone about? And consequently: how can it be that most truly? Flatness is exclusive to painting, so go for that. At some point it can't be any flatter, - game over.

It is interesting however to note that most of the artist Greenberg promoted did not seem to pay very much attention to the flatness game. Here we will look at a completely different track, which I think is closer to the artists' ambitions. They were expressionist, remember.

A term, which emerged in the Romanticism, mid 18th century, and was revitalized in late modernism by the abstract expressionists in the US, is the Sublime. I think it belongs to the core of the art concept now claimed to be irrelevant. So we must look into it.

The term can be traced back to Longinos, a Greek philosopher and teacher of rhetoric who lived in the third century AD. In *On the Sublime* he describes the sublime. In his discussion poetry is the subject, as a strong and elevated feeling evoked in us by the poem. "[the Sublime leads the listeners not to persuasion, but to ecstasy: for what is wonderful always goes together with a sense of dismay, and prevails over what is only convincing or delightful, since persuasion, as a rule, is within everyone's grasp: whereas, the Sublime, giving to speech an invincible power and \[an invincible\] strength, rises above every listener](#)". (Burke, editors note, xIvii, 2008) Here the Sublime is used in accord with what I think is a common understanding of the word, at least where I come from, as something out of the ordinary, elevated, extra fine, heightened.

The Longinos text was translated to English in 1739, and must have been well known to Edmund Burke, who in 1757 came with *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (though he only mentions Longinos once). And that is where we will spend a little time, both because of the beauty of the argument and because the abstract expressionists were familiar with Burke.

In Burke's argument the beautiful and the sublime originate from entirely different life experiences. We experience beauty when everything is calm, in their right places and our needs are fulfilled. Beauty and love, not desire, belong together. The sublime, on the other hand, comes out of terror, violence, pain and ultimately death. The experiences we have on the sublime side of this dichotomy are by far stronger than our experience of the beautiful. The sublime experience is not pain or terror itself. It is when we, from a secure place, look into it, into the potential danger, that we have the sublime experience.

WHATEVER is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (Burke, 39, 2008)

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience. The cause of this I shall endeavour to investigate hereafter. (ibid. 40)

And so he does. In short chapters he writes about power, vastness, infinity, obscurity, magnificence, light, darkness, color, succession and uniformity, the cries of animals and other phenomena that elicit the sublime.

All these qualities: power, vastness, darkness etc. will give rise to sublime experiences. When we contemplate over the universe, we touch upon the sublime. To walk in a forest when it is dark and everything is obscured, the colors are gone and we do not really know where we set our feet is much more sublime than to walk in same forest in bright daylight.

In the short paragraph on vastness Burke discusses the significance of the perspective from which we perceive a distance of say 100 yards.

Extension is either in length, height, or depth. Of these the length strikes least; an hundred yards of even ground will never work such an effect as a tower an hundred yards high, or a rock or mountain of that altitude. I am apt to imagine likewise, that height is less grand than depth; and that we are more struck at looking down from a precipice, than looking up at an object of equal height; but of that I am not very positive. A perpendicular has more force in forming the sublime, than an inclined plane; and the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished. (ibid. 72)

I must say that I find this, if I may, beautiful. These, introspective, very accurate, small observations done more than 250 years ago seem to be just as valid still. What about this one?

To avoid the perplexity of general notions; let us set before our eyes a colonnade of uniform pillars planted in a right line; let us take our stand in such a manner, that the eye may shoot along this colonnade, for it has its best effect in this view. In our present situation it is plain, that the rays from the first round pillar will cause in the eye a vibration of that species; an image of the pillar itself. The pillar immediately succeeding increases it; that which follows renews and enforces the impression; each in its order as it succeeds, repeats impulse after impulse, and stroke after stroke, until the eye, long exercised in one particular way, cannot lose that object immediately; and, being violently roused by this continued agitation, it presents the mind with a grand or sublime conception. But instead of viewing a rank of uniform pillars, let us suppose that they succeed each other, a round and a square one alternately. In this case the vibration caused by the first round pillar perishes as soon as it is formed: and one of quite another sort (the square) directly occupies its place; which, however, it resigns as quickly to the round one; and thus the eye proceeds, alternately; taking up one image, and laying down another, as long as the building continues. From whence it is obvious, that, at the last pillar, the impression is as far from continuing as it was at the very first; because, in fact, the sensory can receive no distinct impression but from the last; and it can never of itself resume a dissimilar impression: besides, every variation of the object is a rest and relaxation to the organs of sight; and these reliefs prevent that powerful emotion so necessary to produce the sublime.(ibid. 139f)

For Burke there is no absolute distinction between real life experiences of for instance a starry night and a poetic version of it. Many of his examples are taken from literature. But he seems to think that paintings are more suited for beauty. Paintings are bright and clear, full of curved lines and details. Burke has seen no convincing descriptions of for instance hell in paintings. They are just full of unhappy creatures but unable to elicit in him a real sense of terror. Words, on the other hand, can create obscure, unclear images that have the lack of definition required for a sublime emotion. Although Burke makes no clear distinction between art and real life, he argues that art, which depends on our imagination, will never act as strongly as real life. He asks us to imagine a play where an execution takes place, staged in the best theatre imaginable, the best play, with the best actors, the most convincing backdrop etc. The audience has arrived and just waits for the whole thing to begin. Then a rumor is spread that a real execution will take place at the nearest square. Everyone will leave the theatre immediately to go and see the real event, Burke claims, because it will give rise to stronger emotions. Like it or not.

If you want to create a sublime, not beautiful, painting you must stay away from bright colors (with a possible exception of bright red) and instead use black, brown, deep purple and other dark and mixed colors.

Just a little reminder of the track we are making here: It is possible to write the history of Modernism as the history about how painting moved from illusion and imagery toward the surface and loss of figuration. In that story the main challenge in art was the art immediately previous to itself. New art was only really interesting if it was able to make the next logical step on that road. Art that didn't push the limits of what was visually "legal" played no vital role. That is the common scheme to follow when this history is described. But one can also follow a more expressive track that emphasizes artist's intentions and the content. That is a path that looks more at continuity and constants over time than at changes. One such book is Robert Rosenblum's *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition - Friedrich to Rothko* (Rosenblum 1975).

He sees art taking over the church's role as mediator of deep meaning. In his investigation of the art history from Friedrich to Rothko he follows the expressionist path with emphasis on German painters in the first part and American artists in the second half. Very little attention is paid to the French artists of time span in question. Art is seen as a quasi-religious project. Art speaks to the deeper emotions; it is not primarily a discursive or intellectual game. Not even is arts' main role to surprise or provoke or conquer new land. In Rosenblums history arts' ambition is to hold open a path to mysterious truths and depths that are increasingly unavailable in a secularized world.

Let us then return to claim that art is over. Some may be familiar with Arthur Danto's book on the issue. What he wrote in 1997 no longer upsets anybody. Her states something that now seems quite obvious. Art no longer follows one line. There is no longer one big project or claim of exclusiveness for valid projects, no manifestos. Nothing is automatically ruled out as irrelevant because of style or content. Danto is very enthusiastic about the situation.

The Swedish artist and theorist, Lars Vilks, takes a more cynical stand. In his book on how you can become a contemporary artist in three days he holds a consequently institutional view on what art is. There is nothing intrinsic in an object that makes it art. No object is art in itself. Vilks claims that the notion that something can have and be imbedded with this mysterious quality called art originated in the Romantic area along with the notion of the genius and the masterpiece. Art, in that sense, rested on a certain faith. You could believe in art as you believe in God. But we now know that anything can be art. Duchamp showed us this. But it was not until contemporary art or post modernism took over for modernism that this has been fully realized. So art does not exist and has never existed. People have believed in art but for a young, emerging artist it is better to get rid of such misconceptions and focus on what really exists, namely the art world. And what is allowed in there is art. There is no other criterion for art. A hammer at a building site is not art. The same hammer in a Joseph Kosuth installation is art. The institution defines it, not the object itself.

Vilks' recommendations to the young artist are consequently to learn how to maneuver in the art world. The chapters describe how to build networks, how to increase credibility; what are valid topics in art etc. The clearest recommendation is to spend nearly all ones energy and time on building networks and accordingly little on the artwork itself. The easiest is to resort to the ready made in some sense. It is very witty and in many ways eye opening. Unfortunately, I do not believe it has been translated. Covered as a handbook for artists Vilks delivers a very pointed criticism of the Art World. The main point to make here is the total rejection of art as a quality in the artwork.

If we return to the book fire, the burning Bibles, we must admit that if some atheist dictator did it, we would not be dealing with art, whereas it definitely could be art in a different context. Would it be good art? Again that can only be determined by looking at the context, not the artwork. If it is done at a prestigious place, gets a lot of attention, is surrounded by texts written by famous writers etc. it is good. If somebody does it with low credibility as artist, in a back yard in the art world and few people hear about it, then it is not so good. But it can be important as a vehicle on the road to bigger and more important stages for the artist if he manages to handle it right. This piece has the necessary potential to provoke a number of people, and that is vital, - all according to Vilks.

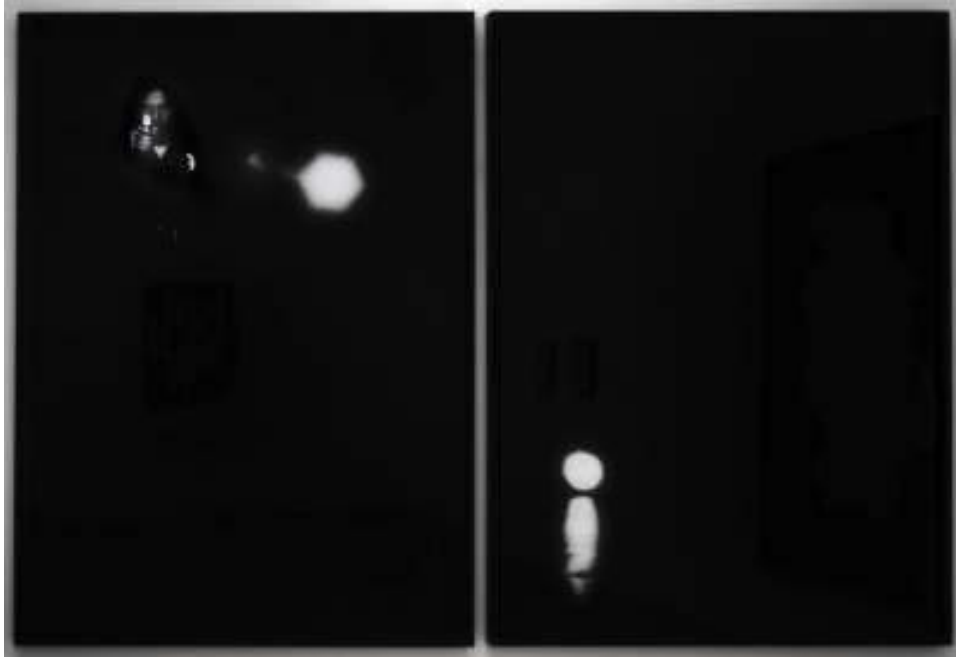
The problem with Vilks' argument is not that he is entirely wrong. Absolutely not, - I think he is right in many respects. The problem is the monolithic, or one-eyed view he takes. The art institution is crucial to what we see as art and how we perceive it. But there is not only institution. There is an art content too.

Let us take a look at a former student of Lars Vilks, Gardar Eide Einarsson.

Eide Einarsson could stand as an example of one who has done everything according to Vilks' book: He knows everybody, he has confused and provoked the right people at the right time, works with social criticism of the light left kind, has made the most prestigious writers interpret him, is correctly vague and non theoretical and leaves it to the text producers to unveil what he does, has a very credible under ground appearance (tattooed all over), has moved to New York etc. He simply confirms that if you follow Vilks' advice, you can't go wrong.

Or is it really that simple? Gardar Eide Einarsson had a big one man show right in Oslo at the absolutely best place you can be invited to show, the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 2010. I went there, not completely unprejudiced, I must admit. I have seen and read about his work over some years and found it quite arrogant and cool in a somewhat calculated way. There is always too little information, if any, and the pieces cry for interpretation. But then some bits of information are picked up here and there, merely as rumors, and you are allowed to know a little more but still not all, unless you belong to an inner circle, I guess. You see a board with some circles painted on it standing along a wall, it looks a bit like a modernist painting of a certain type, and you know that it is intended do so but that it actually is something else. But what? Then somebody tells you that this is a blown up version of Timothy Mc Veigh's sketch of how he would place the different kinds of explosives on the truck he used for the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma, where 168 people were killed. Ok, that certainly makes it different. But I happen to know that art historian who actually works at the Museum, and she happened to come by. If she hadn't I wouldn't have known.

This is how two works shown in 2009 at Bugada&Cargnel, Paris were presented:



Gardar Eide Einarsson

Untitled (Light)

2009

60.24 x 43.31 inches

Edition of 3

Courtesy Galerie BUGADA & CARGNEL, Paris

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Gardar Eide Einarsson (born in 1976 in Oslo, lives and works in New York City) explores in a wry and minimalist way representations of authority, order and power, and their ambiguities. He uses pre-existing images that he imports into the field of art as black and white, often large format paintings, photographs or sculptures.

The diptych *Untitled (Light)* is a blown-up of a photograph from a 1970s police manual, illustrating how to hold a flashlight without risking to get shot at. A light in the night, these images tend strangely towards minimalism and conceptualism. But this representation of the law enforcement agent also reverses the sense of danger, and shows the policeman as a threat hidden in the night.



Gardar Eide Einarsson

Nada (1985)

2009

Acrylic and pencil on canvas

62.99 x 47.24 inches

Pièce unique

Courtesy Galerie BUGADA & CARGNEL, Paris

© Martin Argyroglo

Nada (1985) comes from the eponymous album cover by influential post-industrial band Death in June, whose over-romanticized imagery, linked to a gay sub-culture, included symbols revolving around authoritarianism, violence, and death; here, a mysterious figure comes out of the void.

Eide Einarsson picks up information from various sources, here police manuals and record covers, changes them a little, places them in a new context and gives them a new reading, in itself not very revolutionary but in Eide Einarssons works, effective. There is an underlying darkness to everything. What I think is interesting in this context though, is to see what the text writers see in the works, violence, death, threat hidden in the night... Haven't we heard such words before? This is exactly what the sublime was all about.

Before we come to what an attempted conclusion to this, let me just briefly describe a project by another Norwegian artist of exactly the same generation, Marius Engh. He has a work called Exhume to Consume (which is in itself very mysterious) where he goes into another set of, if you may, myths. In Bosnia-Herzegovina some allegedly amateur archaeologists have found a valley with larger pyramids than those in Egypt and much older. If this is true, which

Engh isn't really concerned to know, much history has to be rewritten. And Bosnia-Herzegovina must be given the role of cradle of European Civilization.

In the catalog we can read this about the project:

What Engh show the audience is nothing very grand: He exhibits the word Europe in bronze letters, some shovels, a tent like thing, some rocks and a few other items, all objects that point at an archaeological site somewhere in Europe.

Much like Eide Einarsson he stages a situation, which in itself, i.e. without further information says very little. It does not, as a Rothko painting does, evoke the sublime feelings directly so to speak. The field is extended into a larger play. Some information is handed out, some held back, and this strategy is also a part of the discourse. But if we accept the premises and enter the stage, we find ourselves surrounded with what Burke would see as prerequisites for a sublime experience, the blurred, the vast, the dark etc.

What I'm saying is not that things do not change, or that art is fundamentally about the sublime. I just do not think art is over. And I do believe that some elements are transhistorical in the sense that they change very slowly. The attraction for the sublime Burke described more than 250 years ago still has validity, and may perhaps have just as strong explanatory power as a theory that installs a new paradigm.

We should ask ourselves how we can make meaningful and strong art and I suggest the sublime as one trace to look into.

Notes:

Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful, Ruthledge Classics, London 2008.

Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko, Tames and Hudson, London 1978.

Lars Vilks, Martin Schibli, Hur man blir samtidskonstnär på tre dagar : handbok med teori, Stockholm 2005.