

A HAUNTED HOUSE¹

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“...These are precious gifts that are as valid and as real as we need them to be. They are the spirit guides that lead us out of the darkness...”

Nick Cave, excerpt from “Letter to Cynthia.” *The Red Hand Files*, issue no. 6, ([theRedHandFiles.com](http://www.theredhandfiles.com)), Oct. 2018.

<https://www.theredhandfiles.com/communication-dream-feeling/>

Accessed 14 Mar. 2025.²

This is a ghost story.

This book is a haunted house; a conceptual palace, filled with murmuring specters flickering in and out of view, indistinct, sometimes familiar (like déjà vu), sometimes teasing, sometimes condescending, often elusive ...

Some of these specters howl, restless, and accusing, confronting us, pushing fingers into our chests, making demands of us.

Not everyone can see these ghosts.

Like Dickens’ Marley, Arthur Danto rattles his chains and reminds us, “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.”

¹This is an essay on the drawings of Alex Vlasov.

²Cited sources are listed in full as part of the text and constitute an important part of this essay. They are presented using a modified MLA format. These source texts are the portals through which the spirit of these ideas come to inhabit us. In many cases the material has been filtered through an intermediary, coming from a collection of writings or analysis of a writing. This too matters in that it calls attention to the capillary action of ideas.

Tiernan Morgan & Lauren Purje. "An Illustrated Guide to Arthur Danto's 'The End of Art.'" *Hyperallergic.com*, 31 Mar. 2015.

<https://hyperallergic.com/191329/an-illustrated-guide-to-arthur-dantos-the-end-of-art/>
Accessed 20 Mar 2025.

For these drawings, with their sometimes pithy phrases, to become art, we, the viewer/reader, must have some knowledge of this theory and history. This understanding is what transforms these untethered jottings into something substantive. By recognizing their antecedents and referents, these drawings become interwoven into a vast network of art historical connections, exponentially multiplying their content.

Indeterminacy.

The box is closed. We cannot know if what is inside is dead or alive.

[Plate 66, THE END OF ART WILL BE THE BEGINNING OF OUR UNDERSTANDING OF IT.]

All artwork is haunted. Everything in the box is alive and dead.

[Bruce] Glaser: Your painting is about art history too, I presume.

[Ad] Reinhardt: Oh sure. The first word of an artist is against artists. Art comes only from art. An artist is related to artists that have come before him and artists that come after him.

Barbara Rose, editor. *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. University of California Press, 1991, p. 16; *Art International*, Winter 1966 – 1967.

(Jacques Derrida - "Différance").⁴

³In referring to the plates, I'm giving the full phrases depicted in the drawings, not the titles.

⁴Lawlor, Leonard. "Jacques Derrida: 5. Deconstruction." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *Plato.stanford.edu*. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, editors. Summer 2023.

In 1963 **Joseph Kosuth** enrolled at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

... He [Ad Reinhardt] came to the Cleveland Art Institute [Cleveland Institute of Art] as a visiting artist while I was a first year student. Most of the audience left his lecture about half-way through. I stayed, asked the only question, and we continued to talk afterwards. Reinhardt gave me his address and said, 'if you ever come to New York, look me up.' So, of course, I eventually did and found myself in his studio on Broadway. He used to buy me lunch occasionally and one day took me to lunch with Rothko. I immediately recognized in Reinhardt a kindred spirit. I can't imagine how he got invited to that school, by the way - after I left there the director attacked me at a faculty meeting and said I was the most destructive freshman in the history of the school. I took it as a compliment at the time...

Joseph Kosuth to Stuart Morgan. "Art as Idea as Idea: An Interview with Joseph Kosuth." *Frieze.com*, 6 May 1994.

<https://www.frieze.com/article/art-idea-idea>
Accessed 13 Mar. 2025.

Ad Reinhardt was born Adolph Dietrich Friedrich Reinhardt on December 24, 1913, in Buffalo, New York. He studied art history under Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University, New York (1931–35), and painting with Carl Holty and Francis Criss at the American Artists School (1936–37).

"Ad Reinhardt." Guggenheim New York, *Guggenheim.org*.

<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/ad-reinhardt>

Accessed 14 Mar. 2025.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>
Accessed 12 Apr. 2025

This citation is listed as a footnote in that it is explanatory. The source for this reference is a general reading of several of Derrida's texts. I recommend reading some Derrida. Try to think of it as poetry.

Ad Reinhardt wrote notes in a calligraphic hand.

[Plate 77, THE LAST POSSIBLE DRAWING.]

Documented in this book are Vlasov's Zen-like Sumi ink drawings. They present words that can be read as short, sometimes fragmentary, statements. They are on sketchbook paper with the fringe preserved at the top or sometimes the sides. Taken collectively, they can be read as a kind of stream of consciousness essay with the subject being the interior dialogue of an artist (maybe). Taken individually, they read as the traces of thoughts, reminders, or affirmations... but "this is not a pipe." The works themselves flicker apparitionally between worlds: These are notes; These are depictions of notes; These are not notes; These are abstract drawings.

... Formalist art (painting and sculpture) is the vanguard of decoration, and, strictly speaking, one could reasonably assert that its art condition is so minimal that for all functional purposes it is not art at all, but pure exercises in aesthetics. Above all things Clement Greenberg is the critic of taste. Behind every one of his decisions is an aesthetic judgement, with those judgments reflecting his taste.

Joseph Kosuth. "Art After Philosophy (1969)." *Academia.edu*, 16 Mar. 2008, 7 of 24, PDF.

https://www.academia.edu/10123135/Art_after_philosophy_1969_Kosuth

Accessed 14 Mar. 2025.

[Plate 46, IT'S NOT PRETTY; Plate 63, I STUDY ART TO DECORATE YOUR HOUSES; Plate 69, TRY CALLING THIS A DECORATION; Plate 85, ART AFTER ART.]

In the quote from "Art After Philosophy", Kosuth is taking a swipe at Greenberg and effectively calling attention to Greenberg's use of taste pawned off as objective judgment. Infused in Greenberg's writing is contempt for those not initiated into the cult of modernism. He celebrates the elitism of the avant-garde.

The avant-garde's specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists' artists, its best poets, poets' poets, has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets. The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs. No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income ...

Clement Greenberg. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press, 1961, 1989, p. 8.

Clement Greenberg is very much a product of the early 20th century and its residue of Victorian ideas. Even in his Marxism, there is a worldview that accepts as natural that the lower socioeconomic classes cannot have culture because they have no money.

In many ways, Vlasov is joining in an argument with Greenberg that Kosuth picked. One part of the project of, at least some, conceptual art, is to dematerialize the art object, to strip it down to pure idea, a non-monetizable commodity that sits outside of capitalism. The problem with this project is, of course, that ideas need modes of transmission. The "thing" that carries that idea becomes the art object and, with the right circumstances, accrues financial value, sometimes significant financial value, but that is only if the right people buy in. At least for the moment, Vlasov has managed to defer the commodification of these drawings.

[Plate 36-37 which includes a drawing with the phrase TAX JEFF KOONS; Plate 40, HAVE YOU SEEN THE WORK OF DAMIEN HIRST; Plate 44, YOU DON'T HAVE TO BUY IT TO HAVE IT. YOU CAN HAVE IT JUST BY KNOWING IT; Plate 60, I'M AGAINST CAPITALISM BUT THIS HAS A PRICE; Plate 67 which includes drawings with the phrases ART DOESN'T CARE IF YOU BUY THIS and THE RED DOT ON THE RIGHT SIDE IS IMPORTANT AF; Plate 76, COULD

BE YOURS FOR \$20K.]

Marcel Duchamp.

[Plate 47, DUCHAMP IS JUST A GUY; Plate 48, CHECKMATE.]

I've long suspected that Duchamp held in contempt those that revered art. I tend to think that *Fountain*, 1917, is as much about punking William Glackens and an all too self-important artworld, as it is about challenging expectations. I find in Duchamp a lot of rage at a senseless world. In 1916 his brother, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, as part of the French army, was stationed in Champagne, France where Duchamp-Villon contracted typhoid and subsequently died. Most of Marcel Duchamp's family had been mobilized in support of the war effort. Even before the death of his brother, death was all pervasive and left no corner of life untouched, not for Duchamp, not for anyone. How could art mean anything if life means so little? This is, of course, the frame for all of Dada but to look more closely at the life of Duchamp, one can see that the rage and contempt manifest into something more solid, and the humor in his work gets ground to a cutting edge.

"Wizard of Oz" style, Marcel Duchamp pulled the curtain back. It's the artist's ability to get buy-in that makes it art. It's art if I say so. It's good art if enough people say so or at least if the right people say so.

It's 2025, and, like Duchamp, we live in a particular moment. Much of the world is in an existential crisis. Politics, at least in the United States, has gone from political theater to reality show. Senseless conflict and suffering are in ample supply: Haiti, Sudan, Gaza, and Ukraine, among some others. By the time this is printed this list will have changed, adding and subtracting place names and peoples in sync with shattering worldviews.

In many (maybe most) of Vlasov's drawings there is, at least on the surface, a sense of playfulness. Plate 112, with its title, "**MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE**," is an example of his tongue-in-cheek humor but Vlasov's wit has a razor's edge to it too. His drawings often cele-

brate or make fun of an implicit kind of existential dread, Plate 64, "**I'M GONNA SAVE THE WORLD**" and then there's Plate 57 which gives me real pause, "I WAS BORN IN A BAD PLACE." (Alex Vlasov was born in Russia.)

John Baldessari, *IMAO*, was a wonderful artist.

[**Book title: I'M MAKING ART (AND BOOKS); Plate 26, I'M MAKING ART; Plate 74, ART IS WHO I AM.**]

John Baldessari's 1971 piece *I Am Making Art* still resists the general public's conception of art. My Aunt Ruth would say art is painting, drawing, and sculpture. She would believe that it should look like something and it should be pretty. Her tastes would definitely fall into the category of Clement Greenberg's kitsch. She's not alone. I think the majority of those outside the "art world" would feel similarly. People get quite feisty sometimes about what gets to be called art. She would not call Baldessari's piece art. For the initiated it is art because Baldessari says it is art. It's a magic act, no different than Hatshepsut's transformation from Queen to King. Her depiction as king makes her king. From the perspective of my Aunt Ruth's worldview, these sorts of transformations are absurd, but they are all the same, very, very real. Art is art because "We" collectively, agree that there is a thing called art. Like money, it only works if the majority of people buy into it, art or money, either one.

Part of the appeal of Baldessari is that he always seems to be winking at this paradox. His work is both absurd and "serious." Baldessari never takes himself too seriously though but the games he plays in his work reveal things about how we make sense of the world. Most artists struggle to find this balance between seriousness and playfulness. Young artists often come to art with the hope that they will do or make something profound. I think for many art is about answering questions about the meaning and value of life. It's all Michelangelo's fault, the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, *David*, and the *Pieta*, that's great and important Western art, it's about *something*. In Western art, art history puts that onus on it. There is this unspoken directive that art must answer *the*

question. This is the downfall of many young artists who find out that art is just exactly what they make it and that can be hard to buy into. It can lead to all sorts of disillusionment.

Antinomy.

If the expectations of artistic greatness don't pull you down, the state of "the world" is enough to disillusion anyone. The bombs that are falling today, the needless suffering that is being endured, will fade to black. We will not remember too long precisely how now feels... but even as this moment leaves us, its inhumanity will be reinvented by ever more creative minds. There has never been a world in which many are not suffering for the ambitions of others. What can art do in the face of this awful truth?

"Thus one dreams of a painting without truth, which, without debt and running the risk of no longer saying anything to anyone [of not interesting anyone: *ne plus rien dire à personne*-TRANS.], would still not give up painting."

Jacques Derrida. *The Truth in Painting*, Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod, translators, University of Chicago Press, 1st edition, 1987, p. 9.

[Plate 65, THE DARKER THE NIGHT, THE BRIGHTER THE STARS; Plate 94, I SHOULD LEARN TO LOOK AT AN EMPTY SKY; Plate 111, I CAN GET YOU ALL THE STARS FROM THE SKY.]

"The darker the night, the brighter the stars." I spent a lot of time looking for the source of this quote. It was déjà vu familiar. Google's AI overview tells me, "The phrase 'the darker the night, the brighter the stars' is a metaphor, often attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky, suggesting that difficult times can highlight the beauty and strength that emerges from adversity" (Retrieved 19 Mar. 2025). It is apparently most associated with Dostoevsky's 1866 novel, *Crime and Punishment*. I haven't read *Crime and Punishment* but I tried to find the page, I wanted to understand the context. Then the internet told me that it was actually by the Russian poet Apollon Aleksandrovich Maykov (1761 - 1838). Then

it tells me "You are likely referring to the quote":

Say not, there is no salvation,
that you are weak with grief:
The darker the night,
the brighter the stars,
the deeper the sorrow,
the closer is God

"Attributed to Apollon Nikolayevich Maykov's work Apollodorus the Gnostic." Google Generative AI. "AI overview for Google search topic: From Apollodor the Gnostic,"

Retrieved 20 Mar. 2025.

(Is this *the* poem by Maykov?) ... As a poem, it is poignant, steeped in human loss. Vlasov's clipping of it strips away its sadness and leaves behind the hope. In this collection of Vlasov's drawings, there is an ever present awareness of mortality and the futility of art in the face of it. Yet, Vlasov's offer of "all the stars from the sky" is magical and makes claims for something more than art, beyond art. It speaks of the generosity inherent in hope married to aspiration.

Art exists not to fix what is wrong with humanity or "the world," but rather to help create it. It cannot keep us from human cruelties, not all of them. It can, rather, add something to the world that is not *that*. The world that it helps create is one that cares for the inner lives of others. It is a world in which thoughts and hopes and dreams matter, are precious. It is meaningful only if we, the viewer/reader, decide to believe it has meaning. We collaborate with the work, and in turn its creator, in producing that meaning. It is this accepting, this collaboration in meaning-making that gives us something more than hardness to believe in.

The introductory quote at the top of this essay is from Nick Cave's, the musician not the artist, online blog, *The Red Hand Files*, in which he responds to submitted questions. The quote is from his reply to Cynthia of Shelburne Falls, Vermont. She wrote: "I have experienced the death of my father, my sister, and my first love in the past few years and feel

that I have some communication with them, mostly through dreams. They are helping me. Are you and Susie feeling that your son Arthur is with you and communicating in some way?" It is such an earnest, human inquiry and Nick Cave's response, in its honesty and its poetry, had me crying the first time I read it. It's real in its human longing; that insatiable yearning to make the absent present again, to communicate with them in some meaningful way.

But aren't we, though, always in communication with the dead? Our lives are filled with ghosts. Their residue informs every part of our reality as we seek to negotiate with them, to try to put them to rest, to parse out what are our own thoughts from their murmurings. It's been lovely to spend time with these drawings, investigating their networks of meaning, unspooling, oh such a limited part of their content. It's not for everyone, but I take great comfort in wandering these sorts of halls in conversation with so many specters.

"Friendship and recognition will be posthumous. Our 'contemporaries' have not yet been born. This is a beautiful thought, as long as one has the strength to bear it."

Hélène Cixous. *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*, Susan Sellers, editor. Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 89.