



By Athena Sharon | Writ 1133 | June 6 2023

Dear Reader,

I'll start off this introduction author's note situation by imploring you to save it for once you're done with this paper. Convoluting, I know, but what did you expect from a paper on modern art? So, read the paper, then come back. I'll wait.

Now that you're back, let's continue. Assuming your integrity is sound, you've now read all 30 or so rambling pages dissecting the intricacies of the modern art world, and even the category of art as a whole. Hopefully you gained something along the way? I'll assume that's a yes for my ego's sake. First off, you may be wondering why I urged you to wait until the end to read this. Well, full transparency, the paper relies a bit on you going in blind. I wanted to write somewhat of a defense of modern art, in-depth analysis, and unconventional beauty as a whole, but knew that wasn't exactly great common ground to start on. I hope you understand, I had to lull you into a false sense of security with my seeming distaste of the genre to get you on board. But now for the long awaited explanation.

I decided to write about art because it has always been a massive part of my life and identity. For as long as I can remember I've doodled and colored and painted, and most of my family does as well. I chose specifically modern art due to my relationship to art as a whole. For a very long time I tortured myself in an attempt to make my art perfect.

I applied that same perfectionism to everything about me; my appearance, my academic achievement, my creativity as a whole. I thought all art had to be perfect to be beautiful, and I wanted my life to be beautiful, so of course I had to be perfect. This way of being and thinking about the world led to an eating disorder that wrecked my life for the majority of my adolescence. Through recovering from my illness, I reframed my relationship to art and creativity. I began making art because it made me happy, reveling in the visible brushstrokes and mistakes I made along the way. It gave me, and still gives me, a sense of purpose and identity that perfection never could. I wanted to share this embracing of the imperfect through my essay, but in a more veiled way. This led to me deciding to write about modern art. Modern art encompasses everything I had to embrace in my recovery; vagueness requiring personal insight, glaring and often purposeful imperfection, and unconventionality. Through defending modern art, or at least increasing the reader's appreciation of it, I hoped to defend alternative forms of beauty as a whole. In short, I wanted to fight against the idea of perfection as a prerequisite for beauty and meaning by choosing an imperfect subgenre of art; something we innately expect to be beautiful.

After going on this journey with me, through depressed anti-capitalist robots and activist candy piles and sideways urinals, I really only hope you take away two things. One, that only you get to decide what beauty and meaning is to you and how they show up in your life. Two, that there can be value in looking beyond the surface; in yourself, and in the world around you.

“Art critic!”

And as per usual I'm stopped in my tracks, head whipping around to follow the line of my friend's pointed finger.

“Really?”

The object of their attention is an unassuming bus stop, pretty standard for this part of San Francisco. That is, covered in semi-phallic graffiti with bits and pieces of trash strewn about, and of course, an empty hot Cheetos bag placed square center on one of the seats accompanied by two half-smoked cigarettes.

“This may not be my finest work but let's see...”

It's a little tradition we have that I'm honestly far too fond of. It gives me an excuse to unleash my pretentiousness in a semi-tolerable way.¹ I switch into a fitting tone of voice, a mix of scalding sarcasm and the laugh I'm suppressing with all my might slipping through the cracks of my syllables.²

“This installation is clearly a poignant commentary on the innately harmful yet

perpetually alluring American culture of consumption. As soon as we stop working and moving, hence the bus stop, we must consume, hence the artfully placed trash. But I'd be remiss to not draw your attention to the juxtaposition of the hot Cheetos bag lying next to the cigarettes. Our culture of constant consumption may be pleasurable, much like a bag of hot Cheetos, but it is uniquely harmful and wasteful, much like... say it with me now...”

I can't help but pause for effect, looking around at the annoyance in my friends' eyes.

“...a half-smoked cigarette.”

“You're the worst, you know that?”

“You flatter me.”

As you may have guessed by now, this running gag so aptly dubbed “art critic” gives anyone in our group the power to say the given words and point at any completely meaningless part of our surroundings. The challenge then, and one I deeply enjoy, is manufacturing an especially contrived analysis of the situation

¹ Not that I ever needed an excuse before, and to be honest “semi-tolerable” may be a bit of a stretch.

² This isn't even mentioning the incredibly-punchable grin that always seems to spread across my face about halfway through my complete and utter B.S tirade.

along the lines of an art critic. The joke is a simple one, poking fun at all the elitist members of the art world singing the praises of a random paint splotch that oh-so-obviously says something profound about the human condition.³ Growing up in San Francisco, our constant trips to the Museum of Modern Art and other similarly controversial galleries informed this perspective. You can only see so many practically empty canvases deemed fine art before you start getting a little cynical.

The rest of the world seemed to agree with us too, to an extent. After all, our little running gag wasn't all too original when put in context with all the other times modern art is the butt of a

joke. The blank canvases, the seemingly zero effort paint splatters, the long winded explanations of nothing in particular, who can blame the majority of people for being a bit skeptical? I'm assuming that you, dear reader, may already have some pointed thoughts about the modern art world; likely along the lines of "I could totally do that". Something about these pieces did resonate with me, though, even if it was just the seeming hilarity of the critics' analyses.⁴ Ever the contrarian, it got me wondering. Could there be more to the seemingly contrived world of modern art? Is there a purpose, perhaps, past all the perceived pompous prose?⁵

Modern and Postmodern Art: A Quick Guide For Those Who Need Definitions

People tend to assume the term "modern art" refers to any art made recently. If your definition of recently starts in the 1850s and ends in the 1950s, this would be a correct assumption. If you do some light reading of *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, it will tell you the modern art movement began alongside the industrial revolution, reflecting the newfound societal focus on progress within its own values. The modernists were idealists and progressives who sought to innovate new art styles with a focus on abstraction; namely expressionism and Dadaism. Jackson Pollock and his paint splatters are the shining stars of abstract expressionism, with each acclaimed work being viewed by thousands of museum-goers each day, many of which are so moved by each piece they can't help but exclaim "I could definitely do that." The apparent rising expert on art and our good friend *The Columbia Encyclopedia* notes that this style has an explicit focus on personal expression (hence the expressionism) and non-representational subject matter (hence the abstract), resulting in pieces with seemingly nonsensical compositions. Dadaist art also leans heavily into the absurd, as so beautifully detailed by, you guessed it, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. This is largely due to its era of origin. This movement formed in response to the bleakness of WWI and its resulting nihilism, purposely subverting the conventions of art as much as possible to reflect the normlessness of the time. Dadaism strove to be as unpredictable as possible; may I draw your attention to Duchamp's Fountain, the revolutionary fine-art sideways urinal, or the entire genre of aptly named "nonsense poetry" that arose at the time. It's important to note, however, that many other styles originating in this time period are still praised today for their classical technique and skill: for instance, impressionism and surrealism. Much of the art of the period, while distinctly stylized, still contained elements of shading, depictions of real-world objects, and aesthetically appealing color combinations. Yes, even your grandpa's favorite Claude Monet is one of those filthy no-good modern artists

³ Because of course, explaining the joke makes it so much funnier, right?

⁴ Not to mention how eerily similar some of it sounds to the way I tend to speak.

⁵ Alliteration is far too fun, so sue me.

Can't Help Myself (or the Programmed Pitiful)

The [24 second video](#) is set to Radiohead's "Exit Music (For A Film)", a robotic arm spinning in circles desperately attempting to contain the pool of ever-leaking blood spreading around it. The almost fifty thousand comments all reflect similar sentiments: "Why am I emotional about a piece of equipment trying to save itself", "it looks tired", "this piece will never fail to break me every time I see it", and the ever so relatable "NOT EXIT MUSIC FOR A FILM PLEASE I CANT DO THIS."⁶ When you [click on the #canthelpmyself bolded in the TikTok caption](#), you're greeted with thousands of other videos along the lines of this, with over a billion views in net total, all set to 15 to 30 second clips of gut-wrenchingly sad trending music. The piece in question is Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's robotic art installation fittingly dubbed *Can't Help Myself*, and it achieved TikTok viral fame in late 2021.

Originally commissioned for the Guggenheim in 2016, the piece quickly gained acclaim in the art world due to its innovative nature. [The Guggenheim Museum](#) identifies *Can't Help Myself* as one of the first commissioned robotic art pieces, with its formerly assembly line employed robotic arm and attached squeegee having one job; to keep the red liquid from flowing outside a coded zone. This task is coded to be impossible, with the liquid flowing back out as soon as it's contained, so the machine performs this



Pictured above: *Can't Help Myself*

function 24/7. It does get a few breaks, as it has several occasional "humanlike" actions listed by the [Guggenheim Conservation Department](#), ranging from the straightforward "ass shake" and "scratch and itch" to the more confusing, for lack of a better word, "goose" and "burn sky". This constant motion since 2016 resulted in the machine's eventual death in 2019,⁷ but not before millions of TikTok users bore witness to its slow decline into a pained and rusted shell of its former self.

To explore the reasons behind this surprising viral success, I conducted a content analysis study of the top comments on several videos regarding the piece. I sought to discover which sentiments people were most commonly expressing about the piece and based my categories on what I saw to be most prevalent across the board. These categories included sentiments like relating to or expressing pity for the robot, describing it having human-like emotions and actions, and an "N/A" section for when neither were applicable.

| Anthropomorphic Comment Type | Percent of Total Comments | Non- Anthropomorphic Comment Type | Percent of Total Comments |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Relates to Robot</i> | 13% | <i>Anti-Anthropomorphic</i> | 10% |
| <i>Expresses Pity/Empathy for Robot</i> | 11% | <i>Expressing Confusion</i> | 7% |

⁶ Yes, I am exposing myself as a diehard Radiohead fan. Here's hoping this is a judgment free zone.

⁷ By how the internet reacted you'd expect someone actually died, hence my use of the word. In actuality, it just ran out of hydraulic fluid and had to be unplugged.

| | | | |
|---|-----|------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Attributes Human Emotions to Robot</i> | 13% | <i>Joking</i> | 3% |
| <i>Attributes Human Actions to Robot</i> | 13% | <i>Arguing with the wall</i> | 19% |
| <i>Total</i> | 50% | <i>Other</i> | 22% |

Around 50% of all comments related to, empathized with, or ascribed human-like traits to the piece, within which the categories were fairly evenly split. This was compared to only 10% of comments that actively criticized this empathizing and attributing of human characteristics to the machine.⁸ The virality of the piece, then, seemed to boil down to the mass amounts of people relating to, feeling bad for, and assigning humanity to it.

All the reasons applicable to *Can't Help Myself's* viral fame can be encompassed by one psychological term: anthropomorphism.⁹ [Carnegie Mellon University](#) has an entire website detailing the phenomenon, which defines anthropomorphism as a human mentality attributing human characteristics and consciousness to animals or inanimate objects. This mindset starts as early as infancy for many people, with infants being drawn to arrangements of shapes that resemble faces as simple as three rectangles. Certain factors influence how likely an object or animal is to be anthropomorphized; whether it has a human face, engages in human-like actions, can be related to, or has social cues connected to it implying humanity.¹⁰

Though there are surface level explanations describing what about a nonhuman makes people more likely to anthropomorphize it, the existence of anthropomorphism

as a common trait is deeply connected to our evolution and definition as a species. In fact, [Carnegie Mellon University](#) notes that anthropomorphism is intrinsically linked with how we define ourselves as human. One of the main ways scientists differentiate humans from other species is through identifying our many unique abilities. Humans are the only known species to have what's called a theory of mind, or the ability to see the world through the perspective of others. This theory of mind, when attributed to objects or animals, is one of the theorized driving forces behind anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is also linked to what may be the most commonly agreed upon element of humanity: that humans are social creatures. [A research paper in the *Psychological Review*](#) journal identified that the human desire and need for social contact was a main driving force behind this process, and that isolated and lonely people are actually more likely to anthropomorphize the things around them.

Human pattern recognition is a third key element behind anthropomorphism. Postdoctoral researcher in experimental psychology [Dr. Marco Varella](#) states that "at the core of anthropomorphism lies a false positive cognitive bias to over-attribute the pattern of the human body and/or mind". This is pointing out how

⁸ My personal favorite, and completely unrelated aspect of my study, was that the most common category of comment aside from empathizing/attributing human traits was "arguing with the wall". That is, angrily responding to no one in particular. My personal favorites were "the lack of media literacy on this app is astounding" and "it shows that some of yall dont undestand^{8.5} art, even tho this is something obvious"

^{8.5} One would assume that people would check their spelling before correcting others on the internet, but these are TikTok comments we're talking about here

⁹ Not to be confused with the more common use of the term, which conjures up images of Zootopia rather than an innate psychological process.

¹⁰ This can be something as simple as naming your dog Bartholemew instead of Fluffy or calling said dog a "little dude".

the human tendency to seek patterns and shortcuts in our everyday perceptions directly leads to anthropomorphism; we most commonly interact with other humans socially, so that shortcut is most prominent in our brains, resulting in us commonly misattributing it to any human-like objects. Pattern recognition is yet another intrinsic element of what makes us human, as detailed by the aptly named neuroscience article [“Superior pattern processing is the essence of the evolved human brain”](#). Humans make sense of the world through simplifying everything into a set of patterns, from stuff as seemingly simple as sensory input¹¹ to the complexities of language, social interaction, and emotion. Anthropomorphism, then, is an expression of all that makes us human: empathy, socialization, and pattern recognition.

Can't Help Myself checks a couple of the boxes typically constituting an anthropomorphizing response. Though it looks distinctly robotic, it has several coded actions that feel human, like scratching an itch or throwing a tantrum. Humanizing social cues characterize the piece's popularity, with the thousands of comments empathizing with the machine likely influencing others to do the same. However, arguably the most significant factor leading to the anthropomorphism of the piece is its relatability. *Can't Help Myself* reached peak internet stardom in the midst of the pandemic, a time where many people felt powerless over their lives and stuck going through the motions. This compounded on top of the growing

disillusionment many expressed about American capitalist society; working the same job following the same schedule, spending all wages earned on basic necessities of life, and doing it all over again day in and day out. A [2021 survey published by Axios and Momentive](#) documented this societal shift towards anti capitalism, especially amongst younger generations. Americans aged 18 to 34 are almost evenly divided between viewing capitalism positively and negatively, a marked shift from 2019's almost 60/40 pro-capitalist anticapitalist split. The Vox article aptly named [“Gen Z doesn't dream of labor”](#) attributes this shift to the exact conditions I've been discussing. “Nobody wants to work in jobs where they are underpaid, underappreciated, and overworked — especially not young people,” it reads, “American workers across various ages, industries, and income brackets have experienced heightened levels of fatigue, burnout, and general dissatisfaction toward their jobs since the pandemic's start.” *Can't Help Myself* mirrored the Sisyphian¹² task of living paycheck to paycheck and the confinement brought on by the pandemic to many who saw it; no matter how hard the machine worked there would always be more to clean up. Both the piece itself and viewers of it reflect the same sentiment; “I can't help myself”.¹³ Much of its success, then, is due to the anthropomorphism directly brought on by its relatability to the hopelessness of late stage capitalism. How oddly fitting, that people forced to be cogs in the economic machine relate so fervently to a literal one.

¹¹ An abundance of alliteration again, apologies

¹² Sisyphian (adj.): describing an action or process akin to the ever-so-engaging eternal torment Sisyphus was sentenced to, rolling a boulder up a hill every day only for said boulder to roll right back down. That is, pointless, impossible, and repeated over and over and over and over....

“Doing the laundry every week is an outright Sisyphian task. What would Camus do?”^{12.5}

^{12.5} Yes, this was yet another long-winded excuse to talk philosophy. Seriously, though, I can't recommend Camus' *On the Myth of Sisyphus* enough.

¹³ Funnily enough the common interpretation of *Can't Help Myself* isn't the meaning the creators had in mind. According to the official description released by the [Guggenheim](#), the piece is actually

a metaphor for the futile bloodshed caused by excessive border control. The metal arm is meant to represent the militarized arm of the state going to great lengths to control the population, with the robotic aspect representing the rising use of technology to monitor and control the population. The blood-like liquid being contained is supposed to represent the citizens, with the gradual accumulation of stains around the piece standing in for the violence and bloodshed this regulation causes. Both the intended meaning and commonly interpreted meaning have some unifying threads, like how both stem from the restrictiveness of current society but are very different overall. This brings up one glaring question, for me at least. What, then, is the actual meaning of the piece; what was intended or what was interpreted? Maybe a mix of both?

Can't Help Myself couldn't be farther removed from what we normally associate with the humanity of art. It's cold, metal, and mechanical, lacking the color and explicit representations or symbols people are used to in more traditional forms. It relies on the coding of a computer to function, with both its physical form and coded processes being constructed by people other than the credited artists themselves. Somehow, though, *Can't Help Myself* managed to gain mass popularity, with

millions of people around the world impacted by it. Somehow, this piece went beyond leaving an impact, unknowingly illustrating the very basis of human cognition and nature through the public's reaction to it. Somehow a system of wires revealed the growing resentment towards our societal system. Somehow, a moving hunk of metal earned its gut-wrenchingly dramatic soundtrack of "[Exit Music \(For a Film\)](#)."¹⁴

Modern and Postmodern Art: A Quick Guide for Those Who Need Definitions (The Sequel)

What most people are referring to, and subsequently criticizing, when they say "modern art" also encapsulates the postmodern and contemporary art movements. Starting around 1950 and continuing on to today, these movements are characterized by a rejection of the more restrictive modernist ideals. Both attempt to move past the formalized aesthetic styles and idealism that painted the prior era; that is, no more "isms". Our good friend *The Columbia Encyclopedia* identifies [contemporary art](#) as a blanket term for all art created after the modern period, including the ever-popular hyper-realism and illustrative styles that, yes, are still created today. *The Contemporary Art Issue* will have you note that [Postmodernism](#) describes the subset of contemporary art that vehemently rejects the traditional and conventional definitions of art. This is, unsurprisingly, the sole unifying factor between subsets of postmodern art. Try getting a room full of people whose whole schtick is rejecting reality to come up with a clear-cut definition for their movement and I doubt you'll have any success. Postmodernists are skeptics at heart, questioning the idea of objective reality by questioning the idea of objective art. Postmodernism is unique, as its wide variety of styles and manifestations are only truly tied together by an attitude and perspective on the world. Postmodern art bears the absolutely molten, on-fire, no-good-very-bad cross of [conceptual art](#). Detailed in *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, this style of art focuses on the concept of the work rather than the appearance of the work. It often completely disregards the aesthetics of the project to make a broader point in general. Yes, dear reader, we've finally arrived at the elusive blank white canvas. Conceptual artists may even use premade objects like clocks, candies, or urinals, in or as the final work. The origins of this art style can, to no surprise of my own, be traced back to the work of the Dadaists. Though it started with Dadaism, conceptual art has grown in prevalence and scope in recent years. The definition itself has expanded as more conceptual artists experiment with varying mediums, now encompassing most forms of art outside of traditional painting and sculpture.

¹⁴ I'm a sucker for a running gag, ok? I would apologize... and I will. I'm sorry. But seriously, the song is absolutely amazing, click

on the link to go give it a much needed (albeit ad ridden, I can't buy you YouTube premium) listen.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (or High Fructose Fine Art)

A pile of individually wrapped candy lays in the corner. The bright reds, yellows, purples, and greens shimmer underneath the harsh museum fluorescent lighting. Go ahead, take one, you're encouraged to. It's quite a large pile, ideal weight 175 pounds, it's not running out anytime soon. The crinkling sound of unwrapping echoes in the relatively empty exhibit, fading into the background as the pronounced sweetness of the ball of smooth sugar melts on your tongue. You look around a bit more. Two clocks on the wall, right next to each other. They seem to be a bit out of sync, maybe an error on the curator's part. The one on the right is a couple minutes behind, hands lagging as they spin round and round with each passing hour. The plaques next to each read the same words: *Untitled* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. They list the materials, exactly what you would've assumed, just some premade candy and some store-bought clocks. "One hell of an artist," you mutter under your breath, sarcasm tinging your tone, "I could definitely do that."¹⁵ Many are quick to assume this is just another one of those conceptual artists, taking and slightly altering Duchamp's claim to fame for some all-too-easy-to-get praise from the pretentious art world. To know this, though, we have to take a look at the man behind the candy pile.

The David Zwirner Gallery currently houses much of Torres' work, and details his life story on their online art guide. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in 1957, and spent most of his early life in his birthplace of Cuba. After beginning to study art at the University of Puerto Rico, he moved to New York in 1979 to pursue his dream of becoming a fine artist. He then received his Bachelors in Fine Arts from



Pictured above: *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A)*

Pictured below: *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*



the Pratt Institute, and eventually his Master's in Fine Arts nearing the end of the 1980s. By the mid-90s his work had been displayed in some of the most prestigious art museums in America, including the Guggenheim, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Venice Biennial, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Many of these pieces were similar to the style of the clocks and the candy pile, taking largely premade objects and arranging them into gallery spaces. Many others were large billboards or collections of smaller canvases, some made up of newspaper clippings or medical reports, others largely blank with just a line of text running across the middle. All carried the spirit of conceptual art with them, focusing on the idea and the message of the piece over its appearance and skill required in creation.

¹⁵ Ok, maybe this isn't the exact way you'd put it, dear reader, but I have to take some artistic liberties. Assuming is far easier than taking you to every art exhibit I talk about here, so do you mind

playing along for a bit? I'm assuming that's a yes. Your kindness truly knows no bounds.

Just hearing this, Gonzalez-Torres seems like the quintessential paradigm of the American dream; a Cuban immigrant turned renowned creator in the art world through the simple medium of conceptual art. Most politicians and public figures during the span of his life, 1957 to 1996, would want you to think the same. Torres' life, however, was far from the simple, inspirational, and palatable story that's most easy to tell; the one that I've been telling up until now. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a gay man living in the United States during the peak of the AIDS epidemic who used his art as activism.

The 1980s were defined by a right wing political climate. The rise of the moral majority and Ronald Reagan's staunchly conservative policies meant there was purposefully little space made for LGBTQ+ people and other minority groups in the public sphere. [The Southern Poverty Law Center](#), a nonprofit civil rights advocacy group, notes several key instances of this widespread bigotry. Immensely popular political groups like "Save Our Children" and "Focus on the Family" actively lobbied against gay rights, and popular psychologists spread fear-sparking misinformation labeling queer people as predators and serial murderers. Discriminatory legislation was incredibly prevalent, with the Department of Defense excluding gay people from the military and the Supreme Court upholding that state anti-sodomy laws were constitutional in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. When the HIV/AIDS¹⁶ epidemic hit the United States in 1981, then, the backlash against predominantly impacted

communities was massive. The religious right viewed the disease as "nature's revenge on gay men"¹⁷ and other perceived undesirable members of society,¹⁸ largely ignoring the devastation it caused. [The CDC](#) states that over 100,000 people died from AIDS in the 1980s alone, and yet it [took Reagan until 1987](#) to give his first address on the disease.

While people in positions of power did little to address the mounting crisis, LGBTQ+ coalitions fought to provide resources for and raise awareness of the impacts of HIV/AIDS despite suppression and censorship. [The Digital Public Library of America's](#) primary source archive displays how this activism came in many forms, ranging from non-violent protests to informational pamphlets to our topic of interest: art.

While activists engaging in protests and distributing pamphlets had the ability to be more overt in their message, many queer artists veiled their messages behind symbolism and conceptual art.¹⁹ This was partially due to necessity; to gain success in the art world, have their pieces placed in galleries, and gain funding, they had to be palatable to society at large. [The National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA), the main funding source for independent artists, faced constant backlash from right-wing political action groups attempting to silence LGBTQ+ voices. The NEA's 1990 appropriations bill mirrored these sentiments, prohibiting funding to any art deemed "homoerotic". This pressure to omit any overtly queer messages caused artists to innovate, though, creating art that both reached a large audience and

¹⁶ [The CDC](#) explains that HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that attacks the immune system, and if it progresses far enough it can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

¹⁷ Yes, this is an actual direct quote from Reagan's communications director Pat Buchanan.

¹⁸ [PBS](#) details how the disease was first identified in America among intravenous drug users; this makes sense as HIV is largely a bloodborne pathogen. This also meant, though, that from the beginning HIV was associated with members of society the Reagan administration and other conservative political figures wanted to get rid of. Reagan initiated the war on drugs, HIV

decimated populations of intravenous drug users. Reagan morally opposed homosexuality, HIV led to mass death in the queer community. It's important to note, though, that this view of HIV/AIDS as a "gay disease" was completely and utterly false. Many people not in the queer community were impacted by HIV/AIDS, contracting it themselves and seeing their friends and family around them succumb to the disease.

¹⁹ There were some artists who engaged in more "shocking" activist art. [The Guardian](#) references Ron Athey, who created a piece made of cloth soaked in the blood of a fellow artist diagnosed with HIV hung from the ceiling. This was done to force exhibition goers to face their bias against and fear of the disease.

made an activist statement. Felix Gonzalez-Torres pioneered the use of conceptual art as a medium for raising awareness, walking the line between engaging all kinds of viewers and activism. In a [1995 interview](#),²⁰ Gonzalez-Torres described this, stating,

“Great work has sentimentality and ruthlessness in the appropriate balance. [My art is] about infiltration... It’s also about inclusion, about being inclusive. It’s beautiful; people get into it. But then, the title or something, if you look really closely at the work, gives out that it’s something else.... We also have to trust the viewer and trust the power of the object. And the power is in simple things. I like the kind of clarity that that brings to thought. It keeps thought from being opaque.”

Felix trusted his audience enough to be able to interpret his conceptual art, and understood that a more subdued and hidden message in his art would allow it to reach, and eventually impact, more people. The simplicity of the premade objects combined with their deeper meaning made his work the perfect balance of complex, meaningful, and palatable to a critical audience. This is beautifully displayed in the untitled pieces consisting of the candy and the clocks.

The first hint at the untitled pile of candy’s deeper meaning is its unofficial title: [Portrait of Ross in L.A.](#) The title refers to Gonzalez-Torres’ partner of eight years, Ross Laycock. Ross was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS five years into their relationship, and passed away due to the disease three years later. The pile of candy, then, is a representation of Ross’ slow succumbing to his illness. Starting at an “ideal weight” of 175 pounds, the average weight of an adult male,

the pile shrinks over time as patrons take pieces of candy. The interactive aspect of this piece represented the hand all of society had to play in the devastation of the AIDS epidemic; society ignoring or even appreciating the disease as it killed thousands of queer people, bigoted politicians not funding research into treatments or even attempting to raise awareness, and all those who simply stayed silent. In this way, the piece also highlights the hand society had in the death of Torres’ love Ross himself. It forces the audience to face the hand their individual choices have on who is deemed deserving of life, who lives, who’s deemed deserving of death, and who dies.²¹ The brightness and seeming harmlessness of the candy mirrors how trivially the AIDS epidemic was treated by the U.S government and society as a whole: What’s the harm in just taking one piece? What’s the harm in waiting a couple years?

The untitled clocks reflect similar themes of love and loss, with the alternate title of [“Perfect Lovers”](#). Initially set to the same exact time, they slowly fell out of sync as the gears and mechanisms keeping them running wore down.²² The two clocks represent Felix and Ross; perfect for each other, always in sync, until the slow wasting away brought on by AIDS left them separated and alone. Felix described watching Ross’ slow decline in the [aforementioned 1995 interview](#),

“His beautiful, incredible body, this entity of perfection just physically, thoroughly [disappearing] right in front of your eyes... Just [disappearing] like a dried flower... I would say that when he was becoming less of a person I was loving him more. Every lesion he got I loved him more. Until the

²⁰ In which, funnily enough, he was actually quoted as saying “I hate interviews.”

²¹ Acclaimed queer theorist and sociologist Michel Foucault coined the term to describe this: [biopower](#). Biopower details the ability of those in positions of power in society to choose who lives and dies. This can be through direct policy, through lack of necessary policy, or through indirect means like stigmatization.

²² This piece can also be very relatable to a large audience when taken in a broader context. Most everyone has experienced falling out of synch with someone important to them; falling out of love in a relationship, falling out of touch in a friendship, or losing a friend or family member to a degenerative disease.

last second. I told him, 'I want to be there until your last breath,'”

On January 9th, 1996, Felix Gonzalez-Torres succumbed to AIDS, [passing away in his Miami home at the age of 38](#).²³ Since his death, his art has been displayed around the world in several traveling posthumous exhibitions and has been housed in countless widely acclaimed art galleries. Since his death, and thanks to the art and activism he and others dedicated their lives to, an effective treatment for HIV/AIDS has become accessible to the public, allowing those diagnosed with the disease to live long, happy lives. There is still no cure. Since his death, and thanks to the activism and art he and others dedicated their lives to, LGBTQ+ rights have made massive progress in the United States, with same-sex marriage being legal in all 50 states and [a majority of Americans supporting same-sex marriage](#). Many American politicians and religious institutions still call for the removal of these rights. The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres still stands the

test of time as a powerful statement against bigotry and for love and inclusion. In his work, there is an important lesson to be learned about the power of each.

It's easy to assume that the importance and work of queer activists lies mostly in the past, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The censorship and oppression of LGBTQ+ people that characterized the 1980s is returning in policy and popular right-wing sentiments. [From “Don't Say Gay” bills censoring teachers in schools to bans on gender affirming care for trans youth to bathroom mandates forcing trans people to use the bathroom of the gender assigned to them at birth](#), it's clear the path policymakers are headed down. Institutional oppression and demonization of queer people never went away, it just changed its face. The only thing to do, then, is what LGBTQ+ activists, artists, and communities have been doing since day one: raising awareness, sharing resources, and speaking out against bigoted policy.

10 Reasons You Even Care About Modern Art in the First Place

1. You grew up drawing terrible lines and squiggles with crayons, filling with joy when your parents hung them up on the fridge with one of those silly little letter magnets.
2. As a kid your dad sang you to sleep, keys masterfully plucking the piano as you stretched your limbs across the corduroy couch. As you closed your eyes you tried to memorize the still life painting above his head down to the perfect purple brush stroke.
3. You have this old memory of standing for what felt like hours in the hot sun so your Uncle could get a reference photo for a new painting. It was supposed to be of you with whales in the sky. You remember asking if he saw them yet. Years later, when you look out your window, you're still trying to find them.
4. You grew out of crayons and onto canvas stained with acrylic paints, pencils doodling eyes and stars in notebook pages, outlining teardrops with pens and turning them into smiling faces once the page dried.
5. You've always wanted to be an artist. If you couldn't be an artist, well, then you always wanted to be art.
6. You spent most of your life hating the image in the mirror, picking apart imperfections against a backdrop of cold bathroom tile. You thought art had to be perfect to be beautiful. You weren't either.

²³ This was only 9 months after he gave the interview I've been referencing.

7. You're staring at the 5 self portraits across from your dorm room desk, though calling them that might be a bit of an overstatement. Each is adorned with bright streaks of color, exaggerated features, visible brushstrokes, and a countenance that looks nothing like your own. You wonder if they could ever be art.
8. You stumbled across one of your tattered treatment notebooks the other day and flipped through the pages. You noticed how much more intricate each scratchy pencil sketch got as the days went on, how doodles turned into drawings by the last page. It made you smile.
9. Your best friend in middle school taught you how to draw a realistic eye on the table in the back of science class. When you were outed a year later, she drew dozens on your hands to calm you down. The pen stained your skin for days. Sometimes, you still draw a small one on your left knuckle.
10. You've realized things don't need to be perfect to be beautiful. You've realized things don't need to be beautiful to be art

Duchamp's Fountain (or Art's Most Famous Urinal)

Founded in the early 20th century, The Philadelphia Museum of Art has remained a cultural staple for the 150 years of its existence. Behind the smooth white columned facade of its pristine Greco-Roman architecture lies some of the finest and most famous and influential art pieces of recent memory. [Thousands of paintings, sculptures, and installations speckle the inside, all organized into carefully curated exhibits that see over half a million visitors annually.](#) But housed next to the likes of Monet, Dali, and Picasso, sits something else. Inside the walls of the historic Philadelphia Museum of Art lies a urinal. "Well of course," the astute reader may posit, "I would assume they'd include bathrooms in the building design". But this urinal is different, special, one of a kind.²⁴ This urinal is an art exhibit itself, and a historic one at that, indicative of a larger movement and discourse within the artistic community. Namely, what even is art? And can something as simple as a urinal fall into that category?



Pictured above: *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. As detailed by the [Tate art museum collective](#), the story of the infamous urinal begins with one Marcel Duchamp, a French Dadaist artist active around the 1920s and known for his

²⁴ I respond with the passion and vigor of someone who anticipated this response because, of course, I did.

relative cynicism toward the art world at large.²⁵ He frequently criticized art that focused heavily on aesthetics and appearances: art that was pretty.²⁶ Simply put, he wanted art to be more than what meets or pleases the eye, and accomplished that via art that didn't please the eye at all. In an attempt to subvert the standards of art at the time, Duchamp came up with the idea of the readymade. As defined by [Widewalls art journal's](#) interpretation of Duchamp's own writings, a readymade is a pre-made object, unaltered in any way, theoretically turned into art due to circumstance. Duchamp decided to "make art" simply by stating that something was art.²⁷

This idea most famously manifested itself one day in 1917. Duchamp took an average, premade urinal, turned it on its side, and carved in the alias "R. Mutt" in scratchy, unclean font. He then submitted this apparent artistic marvel to the Society of Independent Artists, an artist collective accepting all submissions into their galleries for a fee of five whole dollars.²⁸ Duchamp was a key and founding member of this society but instead chose to submit his work anonymously to be reviewed before its display. An estimated 2,125 works were submitted to this gallery, with only one rejected. Unsurprisingly, R. Mutt's *Fountain* was the only one that didn't make the cut, with members of the board stating plainly,

"The *Fountain* may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not in an art exhibition and it is, by no definition, a work of art."

Well, the *Fountain* did eventually find its place in an art exhibition of sorts. Duchamp

resigned from the Society of Independent Artists after his work was rejected, and eventually established a Dadaist art journal named *The Blind Man*. He then used this magazine to publish several images of *Fountain*, accompanied by a lengthy argument in favor of the work. This publication popularized the piece to the point that, even though the original has gone missing, art galleries still display replicas and images of the work. Much of this popularity is due to how controversial the piece is. Many believe the same thing the Society of Independent Artists did so long ago: that something so simple and vulgar couldn't possibly have a deeper meaning, that it couldn't possibly be art. To make such a claim, though, we need a definition of art to base this on.

Defining art is a particularly difficult task. [The Merriam Webster Dictionary's](#) no non-sense definition states that art is "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects." This definition is decidedly vague and doesn't necessarily get us too far.²⁹ What we really need here is nuance, and that's not necessarily going to be found in something as simple as a Dictionary definition. We need to call on the philosophers. Given that there have been many notable philosophers and philosophical schools of thought across history, there are many varying and competing definitions of art to choose from.³⁰ [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) notes these definitions can be

²⁵ A trait that sounds oddly familiar...

²⁶ Because God forbid art be nice to look at. Oh the humanity!

²⁷ Sadly this kind of thinking when applied to other fields doesn't result in being called an innovator or a genius in the same way. When Duchamp takes a premade item and calls it art it's his art, but when I copy paste the entirety of a New Yorker article and call it an interpretive constellation essay it's "not my essay" and "a violation of the honor code". Where's the fairness there?

²⁸ Something something inflation, something something the economy, that still seems really cheap for guaranteed^{27.5} admission to a famous art show.

^{27.5} Well I guess technically not guaranteed... guaranteed if you submit literally anything else besides a sideways urinal by a seemingly obscure artist, but I digress.

²⁹ What constitutes skill or creative imagination? Is the production of aesthetic objects a requirement or a suggestion? What even is an "aesthetic object"?

³⁰ I will admit that the entire section was really just me explaining why I'm now forcing you to listen to modern artists AND philosophers. I promise not to make this too painful.

split into two categories; classical and contemporary.³¹

Classical philosophical definitions of art often revolve around the individual philosopher's greater idea of the world. [Plato's theory of Forms](#) states that all aspects of our world and anything we attempt to create are simply representations of their true, pure state that exists outside our reality. These true, pure states of things are the Forms. He viewed the arts as a mimic or representation of the natural world, which is in turn, a mimic or representation of the Forms. This view of art as essentially a copy of a copy made Plato see the entire sphere of art as innately inferior to other pursuits. He also very clearly defined art as imitation and nothing more. So, from one of the many classical points of view, Duchamp fares equally poorly and well. On one hand, no one can argue that *Fountain* is an imitation of the natural world; it's unabashedly a relatively unaltered object, putting it strictly outside the bounds of Plato's idea of art.³² This definition does feel quite reductive, though; boiling down art simply to its mimicry of the natural world excludes a lot of highly acclaimed pieces and doesn't say much about what art is or can be other than critiquing the field as a whole.

Contemporary definitions of art can be a fair bit more exhaustive and descriptive in their criteria, and often stand by themselves without needing a whole lot of context on the philosophers' prior work. Philosopher and renowned art critic Artur Danto stated that art requires all of the following: a defined subject, a style or point of view, a statement made by the artist that the audience of the art has to interpret, and historical context. Duchamp's *Fountain* does debatably fit these criteria. The subject is clear, a urinal, no one's debating that. The style, theoretically, ties into the historical

context of the piece and the statement it was attempting to make. This may seem shocking, but I haven't told the full story of the piece yet.³³

[The Tate art museum collective](#) delves deeper into the intricacies of it all. Duchamp and the Society of Independent Artists had a stated goal of pushing the boundaries of art, constantly attempting to innovate and foster new ideas. Duchamp, however, questioned if his fellow board members really believed in this goal; he especially wondered if they believed in it for everyone. Remember how he submitted the piece under the alias "R. Mutt"? Armut, pronounced similarly, is a German word meaning poverty. The urinal itself was likely chosen due to its connotations: it was provocative at the time, vulgar, gross, for lack of a better word. Duchamp purposely disconnected himself from this highly controversial piece, knowing his status as an acclaimed figure in the art world would likely guarantee it being put front and center in the gallery. This piece was an intentional critique of the status-based art world. Whether that seems utterly contrived is a different conversation entirely, but where it stands it is possible to argue that *Fountain* has a subject, a style, a statement, and a history. According to Danto, *Fountain* could be art.

Other acclaimed philosopher [Monroe Beardsley](#) proposes that an artwork is something that directly creates an intense and unified experience in the viewer, what he called an aesthetic experience. That is, an experience of viewing the artwork that feels different from everyday life, and like something in particular. Beardsley argued that the basis of art is the experience one has while viewing it caused by viewing it, and if that experience exists then it's art. This definition is, admittedly, a tad

³¹ I really wish the same people who made this distinction were responsible for naming the art eras and movements. They would've been so much easier to explain.

³² Since it isn't art to him maybe his opinion of it would be slightly higher, but who's to say.

³³ To be fair, this is just one version of many that have attempted to explain the piece, but the one I find the most compelling and likely considering the words of Duchamp himself.

convoluted. If anyone feels anything in particular while viewing a piece does that automatically make it art? Perceptions and judgements are bound to vary, and it's incredibly hard to pin down what an adequate experience of viewing art even is.

This high-level definition, when taken at its core, can mirror the common discourse around what is and isn't art. People aren't defining art based on a set of exhaustive criteria like our friend Danto too often; that's the role of philosophers, not regular people. Instead we tend to rely on our personal opinion and experience of the art. Do you think it's pretty? I guess it's art then? Well, because you like it of course. But then who actually decides? Duchamp's *Fountain*, while highly controversial, does have its fair few number of fans. Does that make it art?

I mean, while we're asking questions, who even gets to decide how we should define art? Why do I care what Danto or Plato or Beardsley has to say about what I should or shouldn't enjoy? Why do we even feel the need to define art to begin with? Do we need to? Maybe there isn't one definition of art we can stick to or argue over. Whether you agree with Duchamp or the Society of Independent Artists, Danto or Plato or Beardsley, or something else entirely, maybe there's some value in reframing the

seemingly simple question of what art is. Maybe a urinal, in some weird way, *can*³⁴ be art.

A Dilapidated Bus Stop (or the Importance of Depth)

Art is a defining part of who we are. Despite defining us, it is impossible to strictly and universally define. We, then, are forced into the role of art critic with every piece we see. It's easy to take this role lightly, to keep a staunch personal definition of what art, what beauty is, and brush off all the rest. That's your own choice. It's the choice I used to hold with pride. Taking a little time to look into the seemingly contrived, though, can reveal something deeper. Sometimes there is beauty or meaning behind the simple and the ugly. Sometimes there isn't, sure. But you get to define what art is, and in the same way, you get to choose what you find within it. If you look hard enough, there can be beauty, meaning, in most everything. Maybe that's contrived, or naive, but it's what I choose to believe. I choose to live in a beautiful world.

So, dear reader, I'll leave you with this. If you choose to, you can find beauty and meaning in most everything; even an unassuming bus stop accompanied by two half smoked cigarettes.



About the Author

Athena Sharon (they/she) is a first-year psychology and criminology student with a jarring and newly-discovered distaste for writing about themselves in the third person. In their free time, they like to play guitar, listen to any song with at least 6 distortion pedals, and engage in a variety of questionably artsy pursuits. These include but are not limited to: knitting, painting, rambling, collaging, poet-ing for lack of a better word with fitting parallel syntax, thrifting, getting tattooed, a variety of other sound life decisions, you get the idea.

³⁴ Insert big, dramatic, Ted-talk-esque pause here

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