

Not Just Another Manifesto

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Art? No Thing! Analogies Between Art, Science and Philosophy

FRÉ ILGEN

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Fré Ilgen's *Art? No Thing!* is the most important publication by an artist since Kandinsky's *On The Spiritual in Art* (1912). As its enormous length and encyclopaedic scope make clear, Ilgen's book is not just another manifesto – yet another self-legitimizing text by an artist staking a claim to revolutionary uniqueness (such manifestos proliferated ad nauseam in the twentieth century, to the extent that they have become an expected staple of the artist's career kit). Rather, it is a comprehensive, systematic, in depth rethinking of the concept and significance of art. *Art? No Thing!* is a magnum opus, carefully considered in all its details, and forcefully written, with no sacrifice of clarity and accessibility, however difficult and unfamiliar many of the ideas may be to artists. With magisterial sweep, Ilgen moves from theory to theory, re-evaluating and re-thinking virtually every existing view of art, to make his case: art is not a thing – it does not exist in the thing conventionally called a work of art – but is rather the result and expression of an interaction.

In other words, art is a 'no-thing' – and as such related, as Ilgen convincingly argues, to mystical (and mythical) ideas of 'nothingness.' It is a stunning argument, not only because it is supported by a wealth of evidence drawn from many sources, but also because Ilgen makes it clear that the seemingly new idea that art deals with 'the self through the interaction of object and self' was in fact latent since the beginning of the twentieth century – and even before, however implicitly, in seemingly mystical non-Western theories of art and matter. Thus Ilgen quotes with approval the twelfth-century Chinese thinker, Chu Hsi: 'To the man who is intimately aware of Creative Mind, there is

not an iota of matter throughout the whole earth'.

If Kandinsky's emphasis on inner necessity is the Ariadne's thread leading us through the labyrinth of twentieth-century advanced art, then Ilgen's emphasis on what might be called scientific necessity is likely to become the guide to the understanding of advanced art in the twenty-first century. Kandinsky was already aware of the acute impact of the new physics on art. He was shocked when he heard that the atom was not the most fundamental unit of matter, but could be split into radioactive particles, and in a sense modelled his art on this fact, splitting the work into radioactive particles of colour and line. Just as the atom is a dynamic form composed of subatomic particles of energy in subtly calibrated relationship, so Kandinsky's abstractions are dynamically unified constellations of subatomic particles of visual energy in carefully calibrated emotional relationship. If the atom is not hard and solid – if the new physics dispensed with what might be called absolute matter, regarding it instead as a form and expression of absolute energy (sometimes materially stabilised, more often an immaterial cosmic presence, always influential if not always felt) – Kandinsky saw no reason to pretend that the work of art was 'hard' and 'solid,' that is, materially stable.

As Ilgen writes:

there is only truth in the unity or wholeness, which in art is called a composition: the interactions between the pictorial elements are more important than the individual pictorial elements separately. In the same way, the objects in an environment cannot really be understood without the interactions between each other and the environment. Also the whole of the composition in art is more than the sum of the pictorial elements.

The implication is that the interactions between the pictorial elements mir-

ror the interactions of object and self. The 'objective' work of art enters the environment, reflecting its interactions and interacting with it 'subjectively.' If so, it is a monad in principle – a monad that is the projection of the monad that is the human being – as Ilgen's discussion of Leibniz's concept of the monad suggests. The monad is the microcosmic reflection of what Leibniz calls the pre-established harmony of the macrocosmos. It is as though Ilgen is arguing for the pre-established harmony of science and art as well as between art and nature. His reminder that we are part of nature – which is why it is natural for us to make art – suggests as much. It also suggests that scientific investigation into nature is self-investigation. Scientific knowledge is self-knowledge. (Let us recall that Leibniz also developed the idea of a continuum of 'petites' perceptions – and the calculus that can differentiate them – which Ilgen makes good use of in understanding modern art.)

Science has advanced a good deal since Kandinsky's – and Leibniz's – day, and Ilgen is acutely aware of the advance and

Fré Ilgen, *Let's Dance*, Köln Arcaden, Cologne, 2004/2005 Stainless steel and industrial paint.



its impact on art. He discusses, with enviable ease and clarity, the new biology of the brain and the new physics of space-time, showing their influence on art. Indeed, the underlying assumption of the book is that 'science and art are closing the gap between their very different approaches to this major topic of perception of reality'. Ilgen not only understands abstract scientific theory but the experimental practice that provides evidence for it, suggesting that he regards material works of art as practical experiments in abstract art theory – and, by reason of the convergence of science and art, art experiments are implicitly scientific experiments. There is a personal dimension to this way of thinking: Ilgen's father, Heinrich Rüdiger Ilgen, was a technological artist of sorts. A physicist who taught at the Eindhoven Technical University, he invented the human-size version of the Faraday Cage, a 'metallic meshwork [that] effectively screens ambient electromagnetic waves from the enclosed region' (illustrated in the book). Ilgen plays down the influence of his father, but it is clearly there.

Ilgen's spiritual fathers – the thinkers he repeatedly returns to – are Charles Biederman, David Bohm and Kitaro Nishida. Biederman and Bohm have a chapter to themselves (they exchanged letters), and references to Nishida's ideas appear in almost half the chapters. To classify these heuristic thinkers simply as artists, philosophers or scientists is to miss the point. They are all three at once, like Ilgen. Ilgen's title tells us that he is interested in analogies between art, science and philosophy, but, like his trio of thinkers, he repeatedly blurs the boundaries between them, suggesting that they are one and the same enterprise in principle. All three 'research' reality for its essence. Biederman is perhaps the most important of the three for Ilgen, perhaps because he consciously made no-things that can conventionally be called material works of art. I think Ilgen builds on Biederman's *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (1948). It is not only a major theoretical statement in the grand tradition of art theoretical writing established by Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, but, like Ilgen's book, it is also a wide-ranging, sophisticated compendium of highly influential ideas about the nature of reality – the core epistemological problem of the twentieth century, as Breton insisted, when he wrote, in his 1928 essay

'Surrealism and Painting,' 'that in this epoch it is reality itself that is in question.'

For me a major shortcoming of Ilgen's book is that it does not deal – in any way – with the way psychoanalysis and Surrealism show that the existence of dream reality, that is, the reality of the unconscious, brings conventional consciousness of reality into question. They also suggest that the conventional scientific understanding of reality does not bring it into question. Instead, modern science shows only that matter is not what it seems to be to unquestioning perception, that is, practical, banal, uncritical everyday perception. I am suggesting that Ilgen has a limited view of the self. Is it not possible that what he eloquently calls 'the narrative of being,' 'made accessible in the process of interaction between ourselves and an artifact, caused by the particular appearance of this artifact', involves an unconscious narrative? The process of unconscious interaction between ourselves and an artefact is not the same as the process of conscious interaction. This means that appearances in the unconscious are not what they are in consciousness, suggesting that there are two different narratives of being, one unconscious, the other conscious, which may or may not converge in what Breton called 'supereality,' that is, a surreal sense of being. Certainly, there is room for an unconscious narrative in Bohm's important theory of implicate order, which emphasises feeling and intuition, as Ilgen makes clear. He quotes with approval Biederman's statement that 'Our feelings are our life-link with nature, as they are with other human beings'. Bohm writes: 'in creativity, a pre-given pattern is never what is relevant. Rather it is the understanding of totality, in which something new emerges'. If so, then understanding the unconscious narrative is part of the understanding of totality. Without doing so, nothing new can emerge.

Ilgen not only extends Biederman's ideas into new scientific and artistic territory, but, more importantly, he continues and in a sense completes Biederman's project of developing an integrated theory of art as well as a theory integrating science and art. Like Biederman, Ilgen convincingly argues that modernist expressive colour and techno-geometrical construction (both carried to a purist extreme in twentieth-century art) are inherently inseparable and interactive, and, perhaps most crucially, are rooted

in a scientific analysis of reality. However much Ilgen tries to establish parity between artistic, philosophical and scientific creativity, it is scientific creativity that most successfully articulates the 'essence of reality'. For Ilgen, however implicitly, modern art makes expressively and sensuously manifest what science regards as the essence of reality, while philosophy articulates the essence in intellectual terms that are too abstract – experience-remote however cognitively comprehensible – to evoke or lead the way to a vital experience of it. For Ilgen, the cognitive clarity of philosophy and science are different in kind: the latter emerges from experimental experience, the former leaves experience behind to establish its own logic. Ilgen seems to think that art has the cognitive import of philosophy without its experiential inadequacy, and experiments with experience the way science does, without trying to capsule it in formulaic theories.

Chapter 8, on 'Dissolving duality,' is the 'pivotal chapter' in the book, as Ilgen acknowledges. It 'explore[s] our psychological interaction with the work of art as object,' but, as I have suggested, its psychology is inadequate. While I agree completely that 'this interaction can be described as virtually dissolving duality,' not only 'the duality between self and object, but also, in a larger sense, the duality between self and world (or nature)', he seems to celebrate this 'mystical' dissolution rather than analysing it. He suggests that it is a return to paradise, to prelapsarian perfection and sublimity in which all seems right and ideal in the world, but he does not examine the motivation and need for this return, which are certainly rooted in early experiences of reciprocity and seamless unity with a primary object, like the need for 'mystical' sexual union. The fact that light has come to be understood as both wave and particle, and that Faraday's and Einstein's idea that particles are details in a field (composition) of electromagnetic energy, which is superordinate to them, are among the many examples of 'dissolving the usual sense of duality' and thus achieving 'a temporary intense union of the self with the world'. (It is impossible to convey, in a short review, the abundance of examples that Ilgen uses to bring his ideas to life. He has a gift for finding the right example and getting it to interact with other examples.) The point is that he is mustering these scientific examples of

unity – and many others from art and philosophy – to make a psychological point. To do so he needs a subtle depth of psychology, for he is dealing with the deepest and subtlest experience of which human beings are capable. Indeed, as Ilgen suggests, it is the basic experience we yearn for – it is a basic need that is rarely satisfied, even by art, and, for that matter, any other socially sanctioned mode of transcendental yearning. Ilgen brilliantly describes the transcendental experience of wholeness of being, but he needs to explain its inner necessity – the insatiable, elemental desire that gives birth to it, and which is suppressed so that we can endure our daily lives.

Ilgen's book raises a fundamental philosophical question: if there is an 'essence of reality,' as he and others have thought, how can the relativity of interactions in a construction of reality – whether in the form of an artistic composition, philosophical logic, or scientific formula – convey it, since such interactions are not essential (nor for that matter is the construction), however necessary they are to its particular character? 'Though everything is continuously changing, we can perceive nature as a whole, because of the organic character of everything, including ourselves,' Ilgen writes, summarising Kupka's views. Yet overcoming the duality between becoming and being – Ilgen's ultimate ambition, and the ultimate ambition of every mystic (and Ilgen has a strong mystical streak, as the pioneering abstractionists did) – means that one must demonstrate that becoming is being and being is becoming. Ilgen suggests that we can do this only when our own becoming temporarily unites with the being of whatever we are perceiving (including the work of art). This means, however, that our perception of the essence of reality is radically relative (like the composition), suggesting that it is an illusion (like the work of art). The apparent union of opposites that occurs with the experiential dissolving of duality may be a necessary illusion or self-deception. It is not what Kant called an illusion of reason, but an illusion of reality that keeps us from being disillusioned by it. It is a kind of absurd illusion of pure reality – a sort of



epistemological surreality, as it were – that keeps us from recognising the absurdity of our own reality. Interacting with nature in a mystical illusion of unity with it, we imagine that we will survive in it, and that we did not appear in it by chance. We are presumably the highest stage of natural evolution – the mirror of consciousness that nature holds up to itself. Nature is no longer our enemy, and we are as permanent as it is, assuring us that we will not disappear in time, as so many other species have in the course of evolution. If, as Ilgen asserts, art is a mode of 'confrontation of ourselves with... reality' that 'make[s] individuality a possibility' and with that 'make[s] us conscious [of] how we experience reality', then to experience reality creatively through art is to realise that reality is not what it seems to be in everyday experience. But does that mean to realise its essence? I suggest that it means to realise that it is always becoming through our individual interaction with it. This is what even the kinetic artists that Ilgen celebrates do. They don't give us the essence of reality, that is, being as such, but endless interactional becoming.

I wish the book included more – many more – images of Ilgen's own kinetic constructions and paintings, indeed, painterly

Fré Ilgen, *Imperial Acclamations* 2005.
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constructions and constructed paintings (his own dissolving of duality). Ilgen's book is beautifully illustrated with many colour reproductions of art works, which make his point decisively, but it could also use illustrations from the realms of science and technology, all the more so because many of the works he reproduces have a scientific and technological dimension. Also, the index should include page numbers as well as section numbers, which would make it more accessible for scholarly use. Ilgen has written a rich work, brilliantly analysing and synthesising many important ideas, with a high sense of purpose, moral as well as intellectual and aesthetic. It will raise the consciousness of scientists and philosophers as well as artists. Ilgen shows that it is possible for an artist to be a scientist and philosopher without subverting or compromising his creativity. Indeed, science and philosophy stimulate and enhance artistic creativity, as Ilgen's own work shows. *Art? No Thing!* is a major contribution to our understanding of the Zeitgeist.

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