A Study of Reconstruction of Realism as the Act of Representing an Object

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Abstract: As is so frequently pointed out, Francisco Goya is the originator of the modern arts. It is certain that his works in his later period featured disastrous humor which dealt with the terrible war or the misery of human beings. The Black Paintings and other print works expose such poignant cruelty and humor that Goya developed inside his mind through his art career. Cruel humor is the key to the modern style of arts.

Modern literature, as the act of representation is linked more directly to meta-language contents, is affected by the development of the linguistics of the 20th century. Since Samuel Beckett or Maurice Blanchot deal with these linguistic themes, the direction of literature tends to be driven to the 'impossibility' of expression by language. Consequently, the act of description by words becomes more disastrous, destructive or absurd. In this respect, devastating cruelty of humor is also one of the characteristics of modern literature.

There is another style of modern representation in “abstraction” developed by Wassily Kandinsky, who did not make much of the natural representation of an object he painted. The tradition of Western painting, which aimed at depiction of an “object”, was revolutionized by his art theory. It is “internal necessity”, according to Kandinsky’s definition, that is the most important thing which synthesizes everything including the style, the form, and the colors of the work. His art method is the synthesis of spirit and the internal realism of an artist.

Otto Dix, a German painter, painted his works based on the Nietschean existential realism. His style is completely in contrast to that of Kandinsky who denied the importance of an object. For Dix, an object is the most important factor for painting. His purpose is to represent the object as it is, depending on the artist’s “eyes.” Thus, his realism as a portrayer is inherited from that of the German tradition, probably Albrecht Dürer. With regard to depicting war, a cynical and humorous style is common with Goya. Although Dix’s humor and cruelty is so serious that his works were persecuted as paintings of antiwar ideas, later he became one of the most important artists in modern arts.

These artists attempted reconstruction of realism. Severe humor and allegories, meta-language motif, and cynical humor are the essential factors of the act of representing objects.

Key words: Cruel humor, Internal necessity, Realism, Goya, Kandinsky, Dix

1. Francisco Goya and the clue to the essence of modernism

It is a fact that there is no exact theory of arts or standard of aesthetic values. These things depend upon the transition of society, changes of age, and the society and individuals constituting communities. For example, what Walter Pater described as the aesthetic classical values of the 19th century is easily understood, considering the background of his age. Pater wrote a traditional art theory in 1873. That is a typical classic criticism which is essentially aesthetic idealism. He could never have known abstraction of the next age, and his idealism was based upon European Romanticism that pursued the idea of beauty, an aesthetic tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks. Walter argues:

'Art, then is, thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material; the ideal examples of poetry and painting being those in which the constituent elements of the composition are so welded together, that the material or subject no longer
strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or the ear only; but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the 'imaginative reason,' that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol. It is the art of music which most completely realizes this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form. Pater's thought concentrates on the "imaginative reason" which is the source of the artist's idea for creation. He regards "music" as the most idealistic art in his theory which synthesizes perception, intellect, reason, imagination, and enthusiasm, and all of those realize the beauty of art that music is able to express. His aestheticism leads to an explanation of the essence of Western arts. It is certain that Renaissance aesthetic art is able to be construed by traditional values like that of Pater's. All constituents are derived from Greek myth, Christian analogue, religious or folklore symbols. The works of Giovanni Cimabue, Leonard da Vinci, Fra Filippo Lippi, or Giorgione are soon explained and understood in the context of such critical values. This critical value is developed, following the tradition of the Western art. However, it was refuted by the wave of modern artistic ideas. The thought of modernism is the idea that criticizes the traditions of Western art.

When considering modernism, it should be first suggested that there is a close relationship between literature and paintings. As André Malraux commented on Francisco Goya, Georges Bataille dealt with the works of Edouard Manet, Samuel Beckett discussed Geer and Bram van Velde, writers are affected by art paintings (and vice versa). It is certain that these painters equally had much impact on the societies and revolutionary methods which led to modern art theory.

Second, it is indicated that there is a critical characteristic in modern literature. Maurice Blanchot who presented the unique concept of the 'absence of écriture' which represents "essential solitude" in his works. According to him, the role of "écriture" is to deprive language of its ability of expression. The concept of absence of language that leads to silence, and non-existence of ability of expression is emphasized in "L'espace littéraire." In this respect, poesy is important recognition. The language which represents poesy is essentially pure and absolute language. Blanchot compares the impact of poesy with the moment when one encounters the work of Alberto Giacometti's sculpture. It is supposed that it is a kind of poetic epiphany. The tremendous impact of arts reduces into nothing but silence. Blanchot's thought is the pursuit of language and art which aims at pure 'présente' of language which represent no 'object' or non-existence of 'écriture.'

In the early part of the 20th century, the idea of modernism spread in the world of literature. A critical problem in modern literature is to reflect on how to represent an object by language, as mentioned above. The style of Blanchot or Samuel Beckett is included in this category. Blanchot sought the silent space or the pure presence of language. Samuel Beckett also pursued how to write by language after James Joyce. But the style of Beckett was more filled with cynicism and sardonic cruelty. If Blanchot was affected by Mallarmé, Hölderlin, or Rilke, Beckett was inclined to the Inferno of Dante, or the absurdity of the meaning of words. In HOW IT IS, Beckett's Inferno or purgatory world created such a strange 'écriture' in sardonic style:

hard to believe too yes that I have a voice yes in me yes when the panting stops yes not at other times no and that I murmur yes I yes in the dark yes in the mud yes for nothing yes I yes but it must be believed yes

And the mud yes the dark yes the mud and the dark are true yes nothing to regret there no

but all this business of voices yes quaqua yes of other worlds yes of someone in another world yes whose kind of dream I am yes said to be yes that he dreams all the time yes tells me all the time yes his only dream yes his only story yes...

only me in any case yes alone yes in the mud yes the dark yes that holds yes the mud and the dark hold yes nothing to regret there no with me sack no I beg your pardon no no sack either no not even a sack with me no
only me yes alone yes with my voices yes my murmur yes when the panting stops yes all that holds yes panting yes worse and worse no answer WORSE AND WORSE yes flat on my belly yes in the mud yes the dark yes nothing to emend there no the arms spread yes like a cross no answer LIKE A CROSS no answer YES OR NO yes2)

These passages are the most significant characteristic of this prosaic work. There are no clear subjects nor sentences. The word “yes” is inserted in every phrase, being in harmony with whole passages. The imagery provides a clue of the world of Dante or a humorous image of Ecce Homo. It is certain that Beckett intended to describe his purgatory of the present age, not by its story and scenario, but by the vortex of language itself. After *Trilogy* and *Text for Nothing*, Beckett aimed to write a play which has the possibility to express his own image on a stage. He regarded this work as the last novel by "the debris of words." In effect, this was not the last, but he succeeded in the depiction of the Dantesque image by destructive language, a world absent of meaning. Both Blanchot and Beckett tried to reflect on how literature should be in the modern age. It may be presumed that the dark shadow of the exhaustion of Western civilization caused by the two World Wars might affect their ideas and values, for a sense of corruption had been amplified by the tremendous impact of the total destructive power caused by wars in the 20th century.

It is well known that Beckett referred to painters and paintings, in considering his own literary world. He compared his ideas with Bram and Geer van Verde, the painters from Holland. It is recognized that there are some conspicuous comments on Bram’s works which have relevance to Beckett’s own thoughts:

"I suggest that van Verde is the first whose painting is bereft, rid of you prefer, of occasion in every shape and form, ideal as well as material, and the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act.... van Verde is the first to desist from this estheticised automatism, the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living3." Beckett also failed to complete the story, or the characters of his novels could not always succeed in completing stories. "Failure" or "impossibilities" are the keywords of Beckett's ideas for literature. Beckett criticizes the arts which are in "the domain of the feasible" that have constituted the history of arts. What Beckett is interested in is the act of arts is in the domain of "the inexpressive." The paintings of van Verde were the very right act of art he intended in his own literature.

The ideas of both of them, Blanchot and Beckett are very similar to each other from the point of view of "non-existence." The object of non-existence, in their case, is extended to every considerable phase possible, that is, the non-existence of the meaning of words, the language itself, the plot of the story, the process of creating art, the possibility of expression, the existence of human beings. They were possessed by the motif of death. Death is the outside and the other of "self". It is death that fundamentally makes humans live, and is the only essence that constitutes all of life of human being. “L’espace litterarie” written by Blanchot is the space of the death, death of language, and the death of human beings. Stillness of the space causes the impact of poesy by dead language.

Third, Western painting is paid attention to again. In modernism, the way of the arts shows diversified styles and forms. These were, at least, uniformly under the influence of some kind of upset in general. The upset leads to the sense of collapse of the Western tradition or civilization caused by mass massacre through the power of war in the modern age. Some artists were charged with a sardonic and humorous style in their works. In the 19th century, the works of Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes. It is a fact that Goya has two-faceness as an artist, one as the court painter to the Spanish Crown, the other as a painter possessed by melancholy and humor. He is also regarded as an artist on the line of demarcation between old traditional masters and the first modern artist.

While Goya, with his strong character, was a talented,
excellent portrait painter, horrifying nightmares, and dark fantasy, insane melancholy were also immanent in him. *The Disasters of War (Los desastres de la guerra)* is the representative work in which Goya intended to disclose the cruel disaster of the war between Spain and French. No one had ever painted more cruel works on wars than Goya in his age. Though *The Third of May 1808* is the one of the most famous of Goya’s war works, this composition remarkably influenced some painters later, Manett, Pablo Picasso and Otto Dix who applied this composition to their own works. The scene of “execution” is such a non-heroic or anti-war motif that it was hardly painted before his age. The scene in which citizens were executed brutally is both realistic and allegorical. Moreover, the print works followed by this motif were more brutal and cruel. People are torn limb from limb, head or body parts are exposed, or a body is skewered, one’s neck is beheaded tightly. But Goya who produced these cruel scenes in succession depicted them rather humorously and sardonically. It seems that he basically regarded human beings as living a more savage, helpless, merciless existence. What supported his ideas as a cool-headed painter was an inclination to modern realism. Like Jacques Callot, a French printmaker, who left works dealing with the Thirty Years’ War, Goya’s eyes as a rational realist exposed the worst cruelty of humans to the public⁴. And this style was refined in his later life. After his ears were damaged, he lived in a house, called Quinta del Sordo (“Deaf Man’s House”), and painted 14 works in a series known as the Black Paintings (*Pinturas Negras*).

What the Black Paintings suggests deals with various allegories: the story of myth in which Saturnus ate his own sons, Udhit who cut the Holofernes’s head, The fairly of the Devil, Stupid man with two women, The dog buried in sand dune, etc. In spite of this Goya, as a court painter, painted the Emperor and the family or the portraits of women of aristocrat class with a realistic touch. He also painted people of the vulgar class who looked so humble, ugly and coarse and who had not been paid any attention as motifs of paintings.

In respect to painting portraits, his technique of realism was in the tradition of European paintings, particularly Spanish style such as those inherited from Velázquez or Rubens. But as for other works associated with common people or horrific humorous motifs, his style is so peculiar that there is no comparative touch in his age. Cool headed allegory and sardonic, his despair of life, all of them are inspired in such works. The expression of people’s faces appearing in the Black Paintings reveals ugliness and demolition or death in general. The facial expressions are similar to those painted in the disasters of the war. Goya looked at people living in a terrible age. For example, the expression of people in *A pilgrimage to San Isidro (La romería de San Isidro)* provides this ugly and grotesque essence in each person’s face (Figure 1). In this work the line of pilgrims is packed with people, most of them, men, opening their mouths, seemingly singing something or crying loudly, going their own ways on pilgrimage. But each of them turns their way just as they like. What does this incoherent absurdity suggest? There is the possibility that it symbolizes the depressed and devastating situation in which people of Spain were placed in those harsh times. This darkness is also affected by Goya’s own health, probably due to his deafness. As he lived his life in a silent world, everything around him has lost its meaning, and the country of Spain was so exhausted by the war caused by Napoleon. Even the politicians of Spain were divided by policy into two groups: the patriots and those dependent on France. Massacre and destruction brought about by the war overwhelmed not only the order of the state but the people’s mind. The cruelty of the violence during the war caused tremendous distress beyond expression in people’s heart. The pilgrimage implies, in this case, that to death, and the course of one’s life there is also a meaningless absurdity. Goya is the first Western painter who expressed a negative world filled with absurdity which criticized humanism seriously. Humanism, in this case, is the spiritual post which Western civilization attempted to construct in the name of Western progress since the age of Renaissance. This work is frequently compared with *La pradera de San Isidro* painted before the war. The landscape which is so peaceful and filled with the enjoyment of people is in contrast to that of *La romería de San Isidro*. Goya’s eyes
Figure 1  *A pilgrimage to San Isidro*, 1819-1823  
La romería de San Isidro  
Mural transferred to canvas, 140 × 438 cm Museo del Prado Madrid. Spain

Figure 2  *Old man and old woman eating a soup*, 1820-1823  
Dos viejos comiendo sopa  
Mural transferred to canvas, 49.3 × 83.4 cm Museo del Prado Madrid. Spain

In his later years drew the pictures of distorted, ugly, and crowds of people providing true reality plainly. Reality, in this case, is rather emphasized by his peculiar style of painting.

Moreover, weird and monstrous expression is recognized in the faces in *Old man and old woman eating a soup* (Dos viejos comiendo sopa) (Figure 2). It is clear that the man on the right side seems to be a skull rather than a real old man’s face. As a dark brown color covers the whole of this work, as other works of the Black Paintings, this work particularly symbolizes the internal agony of Goya who regarded human life as ugly, humorous, trifling things fixed by the “destiny of death” which man can not overcome. The smile of both people presents a real grotesque suggestion of the nihilism or death of the aged. The horrific impact of the smile of the two old people, or that of *Udhit or Asmodeus* seems to exceed the grotesqueness of *Saturne*, for the very smile provides further cruelty than superficial brutality. Humor is the technique of expression for cruelty for Goya, which permeates all his works. Because he was not a traditional portrait painter, but a cynical artist who decided to express the true world he witnessed by his own eyes.

In consequence, the modernity of Francisco Goya
should be emphasized again. On the one hand, he left
great works of numerous portraits related to the
aristocrats, or the Royal family of Spain as a court painter,
on the other hand, he tackled more popular and humorous
and terrible works associated with people’s lives, mental
hospital, customs and war. As Marlow suggested his
proposal that Goya developed the modern age of arts in
his times, it is certain that Goya cut his way through the
traditional values of Western painting. In order to
represent the real human world, it was necessary for him
to introduce a more humorous, sardonic, seriously cynical
style into his works. This essence was compiled in the
Black Paintings or the Disasters of War. Goya trusted his
own eyes to represent the objects he selected. His peculiar
painting style realized creation through the eyes. While
the object, in his case, is very important, his humor
reflects the realism that is more important in his later
works. Such an intolerant spirit is the essence of
modernism in later age. It is quite natural that Goya’s
ideas on art were inherited by artists of the 20th century,
and his style made a trial of reconstruction of the realism
in the traditional Old Master paintings.

2. Abstraction and “internal necessity” of Kandinsky

In the history of German paintings, it is realized that
some groups of artists developed affected by French art,
Impressionism and Fauvism. German expressionism is
one such style that emerged from the transition of
modernism of German arts. They sought their own style
for expression and many German painters left eminent
works. Particularly, Paul Klee and Franz Marc who are
not necessarily categorized in the group of expressionism
are representative artists of the modern age. Marc affected
by Cubism painted mainly animals, and tended to
abstraction following the ideas of Kandinsky. As his
methodology is quite similar to that of Kandinsky, some
of the works of Klee showed their proximity to
Kandinsky. These three painters had one thing in
common, they did not paint the object as it is. Abstraction
is the method they adapted to their theory. Although
Kandinsky was not fond of the term “abstraction” because
he defines his works as “Reale Kunst”, he did not prefer
terms such as “Art non-figurative” or “Gegenstandlose
Kunst”, for these terms deny the object perfectly.
Kandinsky does not deny the existence of the object, but
recognizes it³. He did not merely attach importance to the
representation of the object. So, the term “abstraction” is a
more reasonable term for understanding him.
Furthermore, none developed art theory as confidently and
synthetically as Kandinsky did in his age. He lived for art
and lived his life as an aesthetician. If Paul Klee could be
defined as a poet of paintings, Kandinsky could be
described as a composer.

It is a well known fact that some European painters
suffered persecution from the government of Germany,
because their artistic style was regarded as decadent. Since
expressionism tended to be heavily influenced by
abstraction and avant-garde art, expressionists were
considered to be harmful for “sound” German culture that
aimed at measures to enrich and strengthen Germany
following Nazi politics. It was rare for a government to
persecute art from the view of ideology, criticizing
paintings merely because they were not suitable for the
policy and ideology. It should be particularly mentioned
that this savage stupidity was rooted in the political
violence which opposed European civilization based on
“reason” and completely destroyed the humanity and
dignity of arts. It was like a massacre of arts.

Wassily Kandinsky, who was not a real German,
revolutionized the traditional arts by his ideas and by his
own pictorial thoughts. Kandinsky's ideas were supported
by theoretical reflections, deep insights, and inspiration
for artistic expression. This Russian painter was affected
by his own country, and was particularly affected by
Greek Christian art, the paintings of icons or the
landscapes of Russia. Russia is a country placed next to
eastern Europe, invaded by the powers of Asia, Tatars and
Mongols. It is indicated that the culture and landscape of
Russia were fused with those of Asia. In effect, He
himself seemed to be descended from Asian lineage. So,
Kandinsky growing up in Russia in his childhood loved
the landscapes of Russia and made early works by
tempera or oil paintings which were more ethnic and
romantic. However, after he encountered Monet’s
Haystacks, he was impressed by the way of painting of Monet. The outlines of the plants were so obscure that it was said that Kandinsky was at first embarrassed by the style. Kandinsky did not understand the meaning of non-objectivity presented in Monet’s painting. But Monet’s Impressionistic style was a refined one in which the objects were painted including the move of the plants through the lapse of the time in the wind. In a way, Monet made much of the “image” of the object he saw. What is important was not just the object itself, but the image impressed in the painter’s mind. It is this process of image that provided Kandinsky with the clue to the essence of his own painting method. As he began to perceive the importance of non-objectivity painting, Monet’s style was applied to his own works.

What is most important in considering Kandinsky’s art is to examine his art theory. As he had a career as a teacher in the Bauhaus, he had an ability to describe his ideas in some books: Über das Geistige in der Kunst, Punkt und Linie zu Fläche and Essays über Kunst und Künstler. He developed his own art theory which comprised theory of colors, forms, lines or surface. Johannes Itten, who was also a teacher at the Bauhaus, developed a similar art theory for the education of molding art. Itten had deep insight of colors, contrasts, materials, and form analysis of three dimensions which are inherited as the educational bible for modern art. Kandinsky, 22 years senior to Itten, had tried to present a theory of “abstraction” which could be regarded as a monumental work for modern art theory which affected all ideas related to modernism. Über das Geistige in der Kunst was published in 1911, which was about ten years before he began to work at the Bauhaus.

Although the idea associated with the creation of abstraction tends to be more subjective idealism, Kandinsky’s idea is pregnant with critical consequences for modernism that is probably recognized as an extension of Romanticism. As Romanticism is, in a way, included in subjective idealism, Kandinsky’s idea is not necessarily a revolutionary one. Kandinsky’s idea is based on the “internal necessity” that is the most characteristic element of his art theory.

In the process of the development of painting career, Kandinsky categorized his own works. He classified them mainly into three types: Impression, Improvisation and Composition.

‘An “impression” was the result of a direct impression of external nature, while an “improvisation” was inspired by an impression of internal nature, something unconscious and spontaneous. A “composition”, on the other hand, was conscious and deliberate, and was often preceded by numerous studies.’ This process was developed in relation to the rise of his idea that an object for painting became unimportant. His idea on abstraction was against the traditional assumption of Western paintings that fine art is based on representative imitation of nature. Kandinsky thought that the representation of an object is not essential, and that abstraction is a method for assimilating the object and, nature, and refine them within the artist’s mind. The process of transition of these three types of painting is the realization of his ideas. To realize this, the internal necessity becomes the nucleus of his theory. ‘A form can either delineate a real object or can be a totally abstract entity, such as a square, a circle or a triangle. Between these boundaries of the material and the abstract lie an infinite number of forms upon which the artist can draw. Whether abstract, representational or somewhere in between, however, forms must always be composed according to the “principle of internal necessity”.’ Forms and colors are infinite. And the possible combinations of forms and colors are also infinite. What an artist images in his imagination can be realized in materials through the sublimation and purification of aesthetic idealism. Internal necessity is associated with this art process of sequent activities of refinement. Therefore, according to Kandinsky, creative art in the 20th century has to be generated from the internal necessity that controls all values, virtues, morals, and the conscience of an artist. As he suggests, “All means are moral if they are internally necessity” or “All means are sinful if they did not spring from the source of internal necessity.” What does this internal necessity consist of? He mentions: internal necessity developed from three mystic evidences and necessities.
An artist as a creator has to express works by his own originality.

An artist has to express the work that is characteristic of that age; the work includes the elements of style as internal values which consist of the language of the race as far as the language and the race continue to exist.

An artist, a servant of art, has to express things characteristics of art in general; pure and infinite things are in the essence of art which penetrates into any individuals, races and ages, being the main essence of art recognized by any artists, races and art works of all ages.

Internal necessity is the absolute essence of an artist cultivated by the artist's spirit closely associated with moral, conscience and aestheticism that are critically linked to cultural values common to every age and race. In short, it is a kind of universal aesthetic value that possesses individual and racial characteristics simultaneously. Internal necessity, in the case of art, is also related to the principle of the form and colors which are due to the artist's originality. Kandinsky's "Composition" is, hence, the ultimate product of this creative process. "Composition on the basis of this harmony is the juxtaposition of colouristic and linear forms that have an independent existence as such, derived from internal necessity, which create within the common life arising from this source a whole that is called a picture. Painting is like a thundering collision of different worlds that are destined in and through conflict to create that new world called the work. Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos by means of catastrophes, which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments that symphony we call the music of the spheres." As these comments of Kandinsky's suggest, the theory of 'internal necessity' is significantly subjective idealism. However, Kandinsky is not a person who was inclined to self-righteous values. He had suffered private agony, losing friends during the war (Franz Marc and August Macke) and persons he loved. When he returned Russia, the revolutionary government expropriated all property of Kandinsky and Nina when both were going to begin their new life. Later in Germany, he was driven out of the Bauhaus. Sixteen works were disgraced in public as "Entartete Kunst im Dritten Reich." In addition, they had to escape from Germany and became exiles threatened by the persecution of Nazism. Kandinsky who experienced the hardships of life did not describe the theory with self-complacency, rather, always devoted himself to the systematic art theory that was demonstrated in *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* and other works. He explains all definitions of function of the colors, contrast between light and shade, roles and effects of straight lines and curves, the meaning of various geometric figures including triangles, squares, or circles. These elements were added to the interpretation of his own music sense and impression, which led to the synthesized theory of internal necessity. In this connection, "Composition" and later works are the fruit of his art theory (Figures 3 and 4).

Composition Ⅷ is considered the masterpiece of his time spent at the Bauhaus. Kandinsky recognizes this work as one of the most important work after World War I. In this work, lots of geometric figures create a kind of serene texture; circles, half-crescents, straight lines, curves, triangles and squares make multileveled interactions in the correspondences between colors and forms, composing synthetic serenity on the canvas. A modulated light colored surface affected by light blue controls red and black, bringing about stability in the
A Study of Reconstruction of Realism as the Act of Representing an Object

Figure 4 Composition X, 1939
Komposition X
Oil on canvas, 130 × 195 cm Düsseldorf, Kunstsammung Nordrhein-Westfalen

movement of the strict geometric figures.

Composition X is also an achievement of his which was painted just before World War II. This work is different from previous compositions. The combination of colors and figures are deliberately arranged. More irregular and fine geometric figures are meticulously painted, expressing symphony-like composition implying sensitive and dynamic emotions of humans. Dark-painted canvas carves a relief of each figures and color in detail, forming a kind of small cosmic world that is reminiscent of the throbbing pulse of music like Beethoven’s symphony No.7. There is no ominous hint of world war. Kandinsky presented one of the most superlative abstract compositions as musical painting.

Kandinsky was an artist who developed some of the most important art ideas on “abstraction.” Abstract painting denies the importance of representation of the object. What is important is the soul for painting or poesy of the artist who should undergo the disciplines necessary for devoting the artist to creation of art works. In the case of Kandinsky that was “internal necessity”, the origin of creativity and imagination. To represent the object might be neglected by style, but the enthusiasm for art and painting is the same as that of Goya. Although the direction and methodology of each is quite different from the other, they contributed to the development of revolutionary art in modernism.

3. Otto Dix and the portrayal of the object

It might not be appropriate to consider Otto Dix and his works after the explanation of Kandinsky and abstract theory, because it was Dix and Oscar Kokoschka who criticized and denied the idea of abstraction. The objects — human and landscape — were significantly important for them. To represent an object implies an act of portrayal. In particular, Otto Dix is a man who fundamentally painted humans and war — he never thought of the act of painting without the existence of an object.

Paul Valéry suggested the crisis of European civilization after the World War I in 'La crise de l’esprit', which suggests precursors of the vulnerability of Europeans threatened by the political violence of that age. The overwhelming power of the world war and military forces significantly changed the values of people in Europe, where the most developed civilization was thought to be ensured in the spirit of people. Valéry thought that the spirit of European civilization was based on the certainty of reason and the learning of history was significantly threatened by political violence. He was so sensitive that he might have excessively believed in the purity of human reason, noble spirits in intelligence. Valéry pursued a purified state of individual spirit and
considered European civilization, culture, tradition, and art, trying to analyze them with transcendental ideas and deep insight. But the impact caused by the world war and the confusion was quite enough to alter peoples’ minds.

In contrast to such sensitivity as indicated by Valéry, there were those who showed satire and humor in order to criticize humans and society. Otto Dix was such a painter who left many works related to World War I that he had taken part in as a noncommissioned officer of a heavy machinegun team of German troops. Realism, for Otto Dix, was nothing but a method of representing the merciless reality that could never be created by any one who had never experienced the front line. Dix, the painter, looked everything he could experience in the front line, which was massacre never before experienced by humankind through out history. Franz Marc and August Macke were killed immediately when they took up their positions in the front line. Ernst Barlach who first supported the war in Germany, survived and rigidly opposed the war later. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner suffered from nervous depression by the war, and took his own life, shocked by the persecution of Nazi confiscation. But Dix, a man of unusual fortune, survived long periods at the front line as a painter. So his works were originally derived from what his eyes saw ‘in the very place where he was.’

One of his most important works associated with the war is the print work The War (Der Krieg) made in 1924 (Figures 5 and 6). Dix depicted many corpses as the objects. In Figure 5, two dead soldiers are abandoned in a trench. The right side soldier’s jaw is completely lost, both legs are mangled; the left side soldier has lost the half of the right side of his head, and the internal organs fall out from a bullet wound, and the right arm is missing. In Figure 6, another two heads are focused on. Both heads are decomposing; rottenness is in progress. The stench of putrefaction is invoked. Corrupted brain, rotten internal organs, blood and perishable skin are mixed with the mud of the trench and the field gives off a bad smell. Horrible corpses give strong impact to those who see these works. But it is not only the pitiless landscape; these works express, in addition to the cruelty, there is a poignant humor which is a more important factor in Dix’s work. In both works the two corpses look as if they were talking about something. Their voices are whispering things like “It’s too silly, absurd to do it...we are tired of this war, and want to do no more, don’t you think so?” All soldiers are also radiant with both the mercilessness and helpless humor. Humor, in this case, means the absurdity of
A Study of Reconstruction of Realism as the Act of Representing an Object

Figure 7 Assault Party Advances in Poison-Gas, 1924
Sturmtruppe geht unter Gas vor
Etching, 19.6 × 29.1 cm Otto-Dix-Stiftung, Vaduz

fighting by the arms — heavy machineguns, poison gases, motors, tanks, field artilleries, infections, suppuration — everything in the field. The absurdity of a desperate situation is well expressed in “Assault Party Advances in Poison-Gas (Sturmtruppe geht unter Gas vor) (Figure 7).” The soldiers of this party have hardly any arms except a hand grenade. They are making a charge at the enemy line desperately in the poison gas. The simple color of the print emphasizes the form of gas-masks in the sinister field. This gas-mask (particularly World War I was the first and the last stage where poison gas was practiced between countries without any legal regulation) symbolizes everything — the helpless, desperate hell of the front line. The face of the soldiers are uniformly the same, seemingly like a skeleton. Five soldiers thronging broken barbed wire entanglements close in upon those who see. In spite of the small size (19.7 × 29.1 cm), the humorous and strained atmosphere is very impressive.

The fundamental thought of Otto Dix is based on the effect of Christianity and Friedrich Nietzsche. He was such a Nietzschean that he even had his books in his knapsack in the trenches. Dix’s mind was armed with thoroughly cool-headed realization of reality.

"Jedes Ding hat zwei Gesichter, eines des Vergehens und eines des Werdens": Dieses Nietzsche-Wort, so resümiert Conzelmann, könnte als Motto über dem ganzen Dix-Oeuvre stehen’ (Conzelmann summarizes Dix as follows: All has two faces, the face of extinction and that of generation; these words of Nietzsche represent the motto of all works of Dix.)\(^{(11)}\) Although Dix denied any ideological ideas in his paintings, he was a man of philosophy, deeply influenced by Nietzsche’s nihilism, realism, and existentialism. He did not recognize himself as belonging to German expressionism, nor Neue Sachlichkeit. Dix uniquely developed extraordinary critical ideas, based on his own philosophy. In fact, as a complete realist and satirist, he portrayed Christ in an extreme realistic, mocking style as are shown in Pietà (1912), Verspottung Christi (The Mocking of Christ, 1948), or Ecce Homo (1949). In these works, Christ is so wretched and shabby that he is almost same as the soldiers torn to shreds. The important is the reality of ‘the object’, so Dix intolerably dealt with the image of Christ. The image can never be portrayed with vanity and ostentation, or it should be done by transcendental reality that is closely linked with cruel humor. Because realism can only be expressed by realization of transcendental (Nietzschean) realism. For Otto Dix, the act of painting is to portray the object as it is. His idea of realism is essentially such an original one that no one could follow him.

Dix’s realism sometimes included various forms and styles that were due to the essence of the objects he selected. The effect of distortion, exaggeration, or simplification might lead to an image of Dadaism, or Neue Sachlichkeit, but he did not aim at painting complete political satire or claim to criticise the Nazis. John
Heartfield (Helmut Herzfeld), George Grosz, or Hans Grundig are surely more political, and satirical artists in this regard. Dadaism, grotesque style, intolerant satire played roles as political weapons. Although Dix was also political, his style was not used for political criticism but for depicting the object accurately as a realist.

Dix often created works related to disabled veterans. The disabled veterans are shown as having a wretched existence in his works. Most of them lost their senses and limbs: eyes, noses, ears, arms and legs. Some of them received transplant operations, so they have artificial eyes, mechanical artificial jaws and legs. The common thing among them is the face expression. All of their faces have lost humanity. They are like insects which have lost their compound eyes, legs and antennae (Figure 8). They are still bound by the nightmare and cruelty of the war, so they are sulky impudent stragglers, living without any purposes in the post-war world, losing humane heart. In Figure 8, four veterans are walking on the street: the first man is a noncommissioned officer wearing an Iron Cross, the second man is suffering from symptoms of trembling, the third has no limbs and has lost his eyesight, and the last man has an artificial jaw (the left arm and leg are false). The composition of this grotesque oil painting reminds us of Pieter Bruegel’s *The Parable of the Blind* (1568) or *The Cripples* (1568). Bruegel painted common people and the landscape of the 16th century: children, peasants, hunters, soldiers, fallen angels, devils, or war, massacre, the terror of pestilence. His world is filled with allegory and grotesqueness, and he never forgot to turn his attention to people such as the disabled. Bruegel makes many allusions to the dark side of the human world using grotesque images. As a man of “addiction to reality”, Dix turns his eyes to grotesque ugliness. Cynical humor is included in these depictions of veterans. Their faces seem to be absurd, lacking seriousness. They are walking as if they have rendered many services to the nation. The smile of one veteran and the shamelessness of the noncommissioned officer suggest it. Dix’s words provide hints on the grotesque ugliness: ‘War is simply something so very animalistic: hunger, lice, mud, these insane sounds. Everything is just different. You see, before doing the early pictures I had the feeling that one side of reality hadn’t been portrayed yet at all: ugliness. The war was horrible, but nevertheless gigantic. I couldn’t afford to miss that. You have to see the human being in this uncontrolled state in order to know something about humankind21].’ Dix investigated this reality of ugliness which is a disastrous product of the war. He painted both uglinesses: the survivors, disabled veterans, and crushed corpses in the trench.

It is certain that Dix was a realist who pursued the
ugliness of humans and their activities. War is so gigantic that human can not resist its power at all. People in war are easily smashed to pieces. Dix painted brains bulging out of heads, soggy internal organs, the head torn off by an artillery blast, bloody pieces of human meat. This addiction to ugliness ascribes to his personality as a Nietzschean painter and a traditional German portrayer: ‘denn der Maler wertet nicht, er schaut. Mein Wahlspruch Trau deinen Augen!’ (A painter does not judge but faces up to it. My motto is to trust your eyes!)\(^3\). To face up to reality is the fundamental style of Dix. The most important thing is the object, and how to depict it. In this sense, he is certainly a successor of Lukas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer. Some critics point out the common factors and applied postures between Dix and Dürer in respect of the style of painting\(^4\). It is correct that Dix was remarkably affected by Dürer, because he recognized himself as a portrayer. A portrayer depicts the human in front of the artist, facing up to the reality of the person in detail. “Für mich bleibt jedenfalls das Objekt das Primäre, und die Form wird erst durch das Objekt gestaltet. Daher ist mir stets die Frage von größter Bedeutung gewesen, ob ich dem Ding, das ich sehe, möglichst nahekommte, denn wichtiger als das Wie ist mir das Was. Erst aus dem Was entwickelt sich das Wie” (For me, The object is the primary in any case. The form is originated from the object, hence, what is most important thing for me is to get to the core of the essence of the object. That what is depicted is more important than how to depict it. How to depict it is never developed unless it is determined to be depicted\(^5\). The self-definition as a realist, a portrayer, is quite explicit, and leads us to understand what he pursued in his paintings. Comparison of the both painters’ works provides further understanding of the style of portrayal of the objects (Figures 9 and 10). Dürer’s Portrait of Hieronymus Holzschuher (1526) describes the expression and the personality of the model. Fine drawing of silver-gray hair and mustache, the fur of the coat collar make the person stand out. Tight lips, the fine sharp nose, and stern look of his eyes tell his personality. The piercing eyes seize observers with sharpness. Dix painted the portrait of an actor, Heinrich George (1932) with whom Dix had
been acquainted since 1926. This portrait gives an impact to the observer who sees it. It seems as if Heinrich George pop out of the canvas. His eyes are also sharp, glaring at Dix, the portrayer. Short curled hair, the deep lines on his forehead, the tight lips and the right hand held firmly tell his personality as an actor⁶.

To portray a person with serious realism is to represent the personality perfectly, because 'every good portrait is based on show. The essence of every human being is expressed in a person’s external appearance; the outside is the expression of the inside; i.e. external and internal are identical. This is true to such an extent that even the folds of the clothing, the person’s posture, his hands or ears, immediately tell the painter something about the model’s inner being; the ears often more than the eyes and mouth⁷.' Both Dürer and Dix expressed the inner and outer being of the objects, the portraits. As outer appearance is identical with the inner being of the object, the importance of the object should be emphasized. It is sure that Otto Dix is a painter and a portrayer who is addicted to realism. His style is recognized as a reconstruction of traditional realism in modern art.

4. Reconstruction of realism in modern art

To represent an object is also an important problem for literature. Blanchot and Beckett tried to represent the non-existence of 'écriture' by language. That was a rather fruitless labor. For words inevitably represent something. Complete silence is not able to be depicted by language. In literature, the object is essentially the meaning of words and human existence. The act of representing the object in literature should be fated to continue the act of representation. It is certain that Beckett demonstrates this desperate destiny of modern literature in his works.

In paintings, abstraction is a revolutionary method of painting. Kandinsky’s abstraction showed that there is no importance of the object. What is important is the image produced by the internal necessity of the artist. The fundamental object is immanent in the imagination of an artist. Therefore, an artist creates and realizes the object through imaginative spirits. That is a methodology of reconstructive Romanticism. Kandinsky tried to create a new methodology of painting in a complicated modern society. It is the reason why Kandinsky called his works ‘Reale Kunst.’

Goya and Dix, although they lived in different ages, belong to the same idealism. Cynicism, nihilism, and sardonic humor are the basic philosophy of their art. Goya’s mind, following traditional masters of European painting, produced more dismal humorous realism. His realism is filled with poignant humor that exposes the true reality of human activities. Otto Dix, whose drawing technique is descended from the German tradition of Albrecht Dürer, created works with complete addiction to realism. His philosophical ideas, affected by Nietzsche, are very strict and humorous. He dared to introduce the idea of ugliness and cruelty to paintings. So that the act of representing the object for Otto Dix meant the representation of merciless and ugly reality, and the really abominable human societies through ‘trusted eyes of his.’ Following the tradition of paintings, Dix reconstructed the idea of realism which is based on the European tradition. Therefore, the realism of the 20th century art is sophisticated through the reconstruction of realism of representing an object.

Notes:

4) Jacques Callot (1592-1635), the French printer born in Lorraine, left many print works. Les Miserers Et Les Mal-Hervs is the representative work dealing with the Thirty Years’ War. Innumerable number of people (approximately a third of population) in Germany was suffered from every violent disaster through this war when the mercenary from French, Switzerland, England or Germany deprived them of everything, destroyed cities, and killed people in a very cruel way. This was a beginning of the international war using every firearm at that age. Callot intended to describe the true terrific scenes of the war and every sort of atrocity committed
A Study of Reconstruction of Realism as the Act of Representing an Object

by the brutal soldiers. He dared to focus on the most terrible sight in order to claim the atrocity caused by the war. It is certain that Goya was affected by the realism of Jacques Callot, and the style was inherited to Otto Dix indirectly in the 20th century.

5) Kandinsky suggests this definition in *Essays über Kunst und Künstler*


7) Ibid.: 65.

8) Ibid.: 66.


Translation into English by the author.


14) Eva Karcher points out the common factor of “gazing” between Dürrer’s *Melancholia I* (1514) and Dix’s *Melancholy* (1930) in the book mentioned above (127). And Dieter Scholz points out that Dix applied Dürrer’s style to the woman in the *Triptych Metropolis*. (Dieter Scholz. 1989. ‘The Triptych Metropolis by Otto Dix’ in *Otto Dix Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart*: 78-81)

15) Karl Diemer. op.cit.: 47. translation by the author.

16) Hugo Erfurth, the photographer who had taken many photos of Dix, had taken this scene when Dix painted Heinrich George in 1932.

17) Dix’s words in *Otto Dix* by Eva Karcher. op.cit.: 85.