

A Supreme Lack of Definition: L'art pour l'art

§ On the occasion of the 150th 'anniversary' of Impressionism, Bas Blaasse revisits some of the supposedly self-absorbed legacies of modern art. With the sky as an associative thread, the essay explores the intrinsic value of art for its own sake, making a case for its critical potential against an increasingly instrumental understanding of the world.

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On Wednesday, 13 November 1872, about twenty minutes after dawn, Claude Monet likely completed the work that would inspire the name of a movement that was both a first and a last.¹ *Impression, Soleil Levant* was first displayed a year and a half later on 15 April 1874. An association of artists organised this exhibition, which took place exactly one-hundred-fifty years ago in Nadar's photo studio in Paris. The show is now often regarded as the 'birthplace' of Impressionism, although none of the artists would have self-identified as Impressionist at the time. That same year, Ernest Hoschedé, a French department store magnate and art collector in Paris, bought the painting for today's equivalent of around 350,000 euros. Four years later, when Hoschedé went bankrupt and his art collection was offered at auction, the painting was resold for a quarter of its original price.

In more ways than one, looking at Impressionist paintings today gives us a glimpse into some of the dynamics of a period when the environment, market and industry became an inseparable arrangement — an arrangement from which artists and their works were not exempt. Impressionism began as a countermovement of artists revolting against the aesthetic rulebooks of the time. What bound these artists such as Monet, Renoir, Degas, Morisot and Cézanne was probably less a style or technique than an indebtedness to pursuing aesthetic liberation in general. Today, putting aside their work's countless reproductions as kitsch decoration, we can appreciate their diverse formal innovations as one of the earliest in a long line of modernism's unremitting crusades against traditional criteria of artistic value. In their practice of painting out of doors and on the spot, they broke with the idea of what accurate representation could (or should) look like, producing paintings famously characterised by their pale hues and thin, light touches as if they were, indeed, impressions. And in an artistic milieu still dominated by academic training, partial selection committees and hierarchical display conventions, theirs was a far more unrestricted and democratic artistic mentality.

United in their rejection of the Salon's restricted view of art, the Impressionists' rebellion was accompanied by the liberal assistance of doing business. As art historian Harmon Siegel points out, and he is not the first to do so, these artists 'allied themselves with corporate capitalism.'² The painters formed a joint-stock



CLAUDE MONNET, *Impression, Soleil Levant* (detail), 1872, oil painting on canvas, 50 × 65 cm, Musée Marmottan Monet, © Musée Marmottan Monet / Studio Christian Baraja SLB

- 1 Based on a topographical analysis of the port of Le Havre, astronomical calculations of the positions of the sun and the moon, hydrographic calculations of the tides, meteorological observations of the state of the sky and sea and the direction of the wind, and assumptions about the accuracy of Monet's depictions based on a comparative analysis of the painter's oeuvre, a team of scientists led by Donald Olson has estimated an exact date for the scene depicted. Donald W. Olson, 'Monet in Le Havre: Origins of Impressionism,' *Further Adventures of the Celestial Sleuth* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 97–123.
- 2 Harmon Siegel, 'Flesh and Fluff: Impressionism's Contested Legacy,' *Artforum*, Vol. 62, No. 8, April 2024.



ALFRED STIEGLITZ, *The Hand of Man*, 1902, gelatin silver print, 8.3 × 11.3 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



CLAUDE MONET, *The Gare St-Lazare*, 1877, © The National Gallery, London

company to organise themselves. No longer willing or able to appease the ruling institutions, they turned to a growing market of middle-class collectors. These 'in-dependent' young artists obviously also depended heavily on the scientific and technological advances of a new industrialising world. A whole series of recent, indeed commercial, innovations opened the doors for their efforts. The mid-eighteenth century saw the emergence of business suppliers of painting equipment. These specialised vendors sold everything from stretchers and industrially-mixed paints to prepared canvases and folding easels, eagerly used by outdoor painters. In fact, as has frequently been pointed out, plein-air painting itself was only made possible by the commercial development of the paint tube. The squeezable metal tube prevented the paint from drying out, allowing it to be taken outside for extended periods. But perhaps the most significant change for those nineteenth-century painters of clouds and light, I recently learned, was the explosion around the 1850s of the range of colours available, the result of initial developments in the chemical industry that were then made profitable.³

³ Irene Konefal, 'A New Look at Impressionism: Materials and Techniques of the French Impressionists,' YouTube, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 14 November 2018, https://youtu.be/_hDJJkiwM1A

Artistic subversion can appear faint when looked upon from the safe distance of history. In its attempts at breaking with tradition, Impressionism can be seen as one of the last movements that really struggled with the ambition of realistic representation before subsequent moves left that aim completely at will. Not everything had to be thrown overboard. The Impressionists' reorientation of what counted as artistically interesting continued a trend of artists focusing more and more on ordinary people's lives and their everyday surroundings. They depicted life as it was, exemplified by their focus on industrialisation, suburbanisation, and the leisurely outdoors. In this respect, Siegel has noted that one of the challenges of the Impressionists' ambivalence towards tradition included finding a place in their paintings for the visual presence of modern industrial production so that they could still be considered landscapes. But by the time industrial life became an accepted and even recognisable element of art at the turn of the century, it had become so commonplace that another proponent of modern art actually felt it necessary to remind us of its pictorial qualities.

Founded as a quarterly photography journal by Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work* aimed to establish photography as a fine art. The first issue, published in January 1903, featured one of Stieglitz's own photographs. Taken from the back of a moving train, *The Hand of Man* (1902) can easily be read today as an early form of ecological criticism. But in fact, Stieglitz defended his photograph of an approaching train as an artistic argument, 'an attempt to treat pictorially a subject which enters so much into our daily lives that we are apt to lose sight of the pictorial possibilities of the commonplace.'⁴

4 'The Pictures in this Number,' *Camera Work* 1, January 1903, 63.



ALFRED STIEGLITZ, *Equivalents*, 1927, gelatin silver print, 11.7 x 9.2 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



ALFRED STIEGLITZ, *Equivalents*, 1930, gelatin silver print, 9.2 × 11.7 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Did Monet also think of himself as seizing upon the pictorial possibilities of Le Havre's industrialised mundane? According to visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, Monet's impression of a rising sun captures the modern paradigm of human conquest over nature. The painting, he asserts, 'at once reveals and aestheticizes anthropogenic environmental destruction.'⁵ Mirzoeff clarifies that the smoky atmosphere in Monet's painting of Le Havre is really smog from industrial coal use. In the background of the painting, industrial machinery is visible, with coal smoke coming out of its chimneys, which is responsible for creating the yellow shades captured in the upper part of the painting. The interaction of the coal smoke with the blue morning light and the rising sun's red, Mirzoeff explains, creates the kind of refracted colour field that makes this painting stand out.⁶ Unintentional though it may have been, Mirzoeff believes that the depiction of environmental destruction in popular visual culture creates an 'anaesthetic to actual physical conditions.'⁷ Making pollution look pretty can desensitise us to its harmful effects. 'It comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful.'⁸

Whenever we speak of nature, what we mean by it is (evidently) never outside of human life. Surely, there is a difference between smokestacks and meadows short-grazed by cattle. But as Siegel credibly argued in a recent lecture, many of the iconic Impressionist landscapes that could easily be described as representations of the natural world, such as the countless depictions of the Seine River with its dams, towpaths and planted tree lines along its banks, actually already illustrate human interventions in response to climate changes that were themselves the unintended effects of earlier human alterations to their environment.⁹ And so these elements, which could be said to have become such an integral part of our notion of the picturesque, were, in fact, like Monet's *Impression*, the very embodiment of a new phase in the so-called entanglement of natural and human history. Even Monet's all-too-famous water lilies apparently bobbed around in a pond that the artist kept enlarging, deepening and improving to satisfy his aquatic passions. Moreover, the pond had been part of an artificial body of water dug out centuries earlier to irrigate nearby fields and breed fish.

In the spring of 2005, environmental activist Bill McKibben asserted that what 'the warming world needs now is art, sweet art.'¹⁰ He posited that art could illuminate the gradual unfolding of ecological catastrophe and help us grasp 'the biggest thing that's happened since human civilization emerged.' At the time, McKibben bemoaned the apparent indifference of artists and the broader cultural milieu toward climate change. Nearly two decades later, his lamentation sounds dated. Today, art that engages with ecological crises has arguably become the norm rather than the exception. The belief in art's power to sensitise us and its potential to help us envision a different world resonates throughout the art world, especially in institutional attempts to underscore art's social relevance. There are theories to support this. Like McKibben, Mirzoeff, too, sees an important role for art and artists. Against the unintended 'anesthetisation', Mirzoeff argues for a counter-visibility that goes beyond the aestheticisation of environmental degradation, though one might wonder if this desire projected onto artists is not ultimately of the same tenor, where the existence of one thing is only relevant insofar as it serves the existence of another.

In art school, we were trained to become autonomous artists, ready to criticise the monster we called capitalism. But as unwavering critics of anything

- 5 Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene,' *Public Culture*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2014, 221.
- 6 The feasibility of treating Impressionist paintings as realistic representations has been supported by several recent studies. In particular, one study found that the stylistic changes from more figurative to impressionistic paintings by Turner and Monet over the 19th century strongly correlate with increasing levels of air pollution. Specifically, the shift in their work towards hazier contours and a whiter color palette aligns with the optical changes expected from higher atmospheric aerosol concentrations. These findings suggest that Turner and Monet's paintings reflect aspects of the atmospheric environmental changes during the Industrial Revolution. Anna L. Albright, Peter Huybers, 'Paintings by Turner and Monet depict trends in 19th century air pollution,' *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.*, 120, 2023, pp. 1-8.
- 7 Mirzoeff, p. 223.
- 8 Mirzoeff, p. 220.
- 9 Harmon Siegel, 'Art Matters Lecture with Harmon Siegel: Looking at Impressionism, Thinking About Climate Change,' YouTube, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1 December 2022, <https://youtu.be/aXJY12CVNuk?feature=shared>.
- 10 Bill McKibben, 'What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art,' *Grist*, 22 April 2005.



that even remotely reeked of deregulation, privatisation and exploitation, we were never taught that culture and art in particular could be defined as surplus over strict necessity. That is, if you would ask cultural critic Terry Eagleton to answer where culture comes from. 'You can't have culture in the sense of galleries and museums', he says, 'unless society has evolved to the point where it can produce an economic surplus'.¹¹ Only then, can some people be freed from the chores necessary to ensure human survival. He ascertains that this implies that some people do work so others can make art. Echoing Siegel's analysis above, Eagleton claims the integration of art into the market, coupled with an increasing influence of liberalism and individualism, has allowed it the sense of freedom we revered in art class. Of course, this is not to say that art lacks a capacity for social criticism. But in Eagleton's Marxist reading of cultural history, the distance or freedom from the operative powers needed for any social criticism is contingent on the emancipation that actually ensued from commodification — the very same liberation that enabled art to turn its focus ever more inward, embracing the idea of art for its own sake. 'The miseries of commodification are also an enthralling moment of emancipation'. As exemplified by the proliferation of large-scale art events around the globe, we are very much folded into the thick flesh of neoliberalism. Thus, for Eagleton, the way in which art can be a powerful critic of society lies not so much in what it says but in its 'strange, pointless' nature. 'It's one of the few remaining activities in an increasingly instrumentalised world that exists purely for its own sake'.

And then there was photography. In an article written on the occasion of Impressionism's centenary, Rosalind Krauss speculates about why the Impressionists turned their backs on naturalism. It remains a historical curiosity, she ponders, that artists who could imbue their outdoor explorations with all the possible means of a new era should eventually move away from the realistic painting of the outside world to pioneer early modernist art — an art that, as Krauss describes, would go on to produce 'works that function in the closed circuit of self-reference'.¹² She identifies several factors that likely led Impressionist painters to abandon the pursuit of naturalism. First, scientific advances had already made the task of truly capturing nature in all its complexity seem futile, if not impossible. They were faced with the challenge of finding an alternative vocation for their talents because, secondly, and most decidedly, photography proved greatly more suitable for what had previously been a core activity of painting. By chemically recording light, photography promised to disclose the natural world far beyond the limitations of human perception. The latest art contestants were no longer making paintings of light but were now claiming to be painting *with* light. What's more, according to Krauss, in the photographic processes, natural processes revealed themselves ever more unintelligible to the human intellect. Photography moved nature, as it were, into 'a supreme lack of definition'.¹³

If this is true, such that the perceptual exactitude and directness of camera technologies were among the inducements that led painters to abandon their quest for painting true to nature, then the desire to make photography an accepted art form took a path that swapped out the painterly picturesque for a modernist pact with the non-representational qualities of abstract painting.

11 Terry Eagleton, 'Where does culture come from?', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 46, No. 8, 25 April 2024.

12 Rosalind Krauss, 'Impressionism: The Narcissism of Light,' *Partisan Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 1976, p. 103.

13 Krauss, p. 106.



GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, *Sky above Clouds IV*, 1965, © The Art Institute of Chicago

In 1922, Alfred Stieglitz believed that he had finally reached the point where he could complete a life's long work. For 35 years, not only had he persistently carried the campaign to establish photography as an art in its own right, but he had likewise been haunted by an obsession with capturing clouds. Through clouds, he wrote, he had wanted to put down his entire 'philosophy of life — to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter.'¹⁴ In other words, 'free'. By that time, Stieglitz wanted his photographs to be nothing but photographs. Today, there seems nothing truly remarkable about Stieglitz's photographs of the sky, except perhaps the absence of condensation trails produced by aircraft. The difficulty that comes with photographing the sky is hard to imagine with an iPhone in hand. But before the 1920s, most photographic emulsions were mainly sensitive to light on the blue end of the spectrum. This made it challenging to photograph clouds as the sky would appear very bright, and the clouds would blend in and be hard to distinguish. Around the early 1920s, though, a new photographic emulsion was being developed that finally allowed the full range of colours to be depicted. Stieglitz could take it away. For nearly a decade, Stieglitz made hundreds of 'cloud studies' that he would name *Equivalents*, referring to the way the pictures supposedly captured pure emotion, paralleling the artist's own inner world. Today they are generally referred to as the first abstract photographic works of art — photographs indeed.

The elusiveness of clouds is part of a long history of occurrences that appeal to the imagination. But to meteorologists, the opacity of clouds poses a problem. We have known since the 1970s that clouds play an important role in the climate, and I have recently gleaned from the Internet that the interaction between clouds and the so-called atmospheric circulation, the large-scale movement of air in the atmosphere, is a crucial factor in the reliability of climate models. Some clouds cool the Earth by reflecting the Sun's energy back into space, while others contribute to warming by trapping the Earth's energy and amplifying the greenhouse effect. Understanding cloud interaction is essential for accurately predicting future global warming. Clouds have become a central figure in our climate consciousness.

When I was eight, nothing of that consciousness was distressing my way of looking at clouds when the universe multiplied before my eyes in a matter of minutes. Most of what I experience today, no matter how impressive or remarkable, is preemptively attenuated by images. But when our plane rose over the Atlantic, and I looked out of the window as an eight-year-old, seeing the light of a climbing sun accentuating an impenetrable, fluffy white blanket of clouds for the very first time was something I could never ever have imagined, and it remains one of my most powerful, overwhelming aesthetic memories to this day.

Georgia O'Keeffe must have experienced something similar when, upon returning from one of her many trips across the sky, she recalled how the sky below had been 'a most beautiful solid white' and how it had appeared so secure that she believed she could 'walk right out on it to the horizon if the door opened.'¹⁵ She couldn't wait to get home to paint it. In a 1941 letter O'Keeffe ostensibly wrote in mid-air to her friend Maria Chabot, an indigenous rights activist, she declared that the world would be rid of 'much smallness and pettiness if more people flew.'¹⁶ What we see from the air, the artist confessed, 'is so simple and beautiful I cannot help feeling that it would do something wonderful for the human race.'

- 14 Alfred Stieglitz, 'How I Came to Photograph Clouds,' *Amateur Photographer and Photography* 56 (1923), reprinted in Richard Whelan, ed., *Stieglitz on Photography: His Selected Essays and Notes* (Aperture, 2000), p. 237.
- 15 Lisa Messinger, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2022), p. 176.
- 16 Jack Cowart, Juan Hamilton and Sarah Greenough, eds, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), p. 231, note 81.

The modernist painter, who spent so much of her life living and working in New Mexico, went on to travel extensively throughout the fifties and sixties. On the wings of a globalising world and enjoying recognition at an advanced age, O'Keefe visited many of the far corners of the planet. But looking at her work from this period, O'Keefe scholar Lisa Messinger maintains that it was not so much the places that inspired her art.¹⁷ Actual places or cultures appear only seldom in O'Keefe's drawings and paintings from that era. Flying itself motivated one of her last major subjects.

At the age of seventy-three, O'Keefe embarked on the final productive period of her career. The aerial perspective first manifested itself in paintings and drawings looking down on mountains and rivers. But eventually, O'Keefe turned to the sky itself. Between 1960 and 1977, the artist painted eleven cloudscapes. The works fall broadly into two types: one, a minimalist expanse of white stretching to the horizon, an abstract play of modernist colour and the other, a vibrant blue punctuated by flecks of white, reminiscent of scattered islands. The latter became one of her most iconic series. *Sky above Clouds IV* (1965), O'Keefe's largest painting, is part of that second series. It represents the last of four cloud-scape paintings with such a patchy motif. White fluffs on an undisturbed blue disappear into the horizontal perspective offered by a pink hue that separates the Earth from its atmosphere. We still get a glimpse of the very edges of the body of clouds, with one slightly off-centre to the right, seemingly unwilling to fit in.

Looking up or down can make a world of difference. The inspiration that O'Keefe drew from her vantage point to create her cloudscapes belonged to a manifestly different era than when her then-future husband, Alfred Stieglitz, strained to capture his marvel for the sky. Perhaps the size of *Sky above Clouds IV* speaks to this difference, as it measures an impressive two by seven metres. And although O'Keefe herself described it as 'ridiculous,' in size, the idea had been in her mind for some time.¹⁸ According to a recent article, the inspiration for the large format came in 1964, when O'Keefe was invited to attend the opening of the corporate headquarters of agricultural-machinery manufacturer John Deere in Illinois in the US.¹⁹ Plans were made for O'Keefe to create a monumental mural for the new headquarters' architecture. But despite her initial enthusiasm, the project was abandoned, only for her to revisit the idea one year later, independently of any commercial interest.

In the mid-twentieth century, before the first commercial jet airliner would take off, O'Keefe's conviction that flying would bring many positive things to humankind probably sounded less naive than it does today. For many obvious reasons, it is almost inconceivable to imagine aviation playing even a neutral role in any vision of a sustainable future. Flying, I caught recently, is for (the) birds. But O'Keefe was not writing at a time when anthropogenic emissions were at the forefront of our concerns. She was writing against the backdrop of the Second World War. And in some ways, her impression is reminiscent of the humbleness experienced by astronauts who in the 1960s and 70s first saw the Earth from space, which indeed must have made local conflicts and petty differences seem very insignificant.

Behind the clouds of modern art lies a truth of liberal capitalism. For all their innovation, artists such as Monet, Stieglitz and O'Keefe were also simply responding to the rapid changes taking place around them, harnessing and drawing inspiration from the booming advances of their day. Things are not very different today. Neither artistic ideas nor the means of their realisation can be separated from the ideological products and by-products of perpetual growth. As artist Hito Steyerl writes, 'Contemporary art is a brand name without a brand, ready to be slapped onto almost anything, [...] a licensed playground for a world confused and collapsed by dizzying deregulation.'²⁰ The collective apparatus of contemporary art is itself a prime example of private interests and financial speculation. Perhaps, as Steyerl proposes, we should rather 'look at what it does — not what it shows.'

Zeroing in on the stages between a droplet and a cloud ultimately means facing the indistinguishability reminiscent of a Sorites paradox — the sort of unsolvable challenge that always brings me to realise that there is a reality beyond the effective application of categories. On the face of it, much of today's political, social and environmental criticism seems to strike a similar undertone: our perception of the world, including our interactions with other people, has increasingly marginalised those aspects of life that defy quantification, utility and the relentless pursuit of efficiency. Being good guardians of a liveable future doubtlessly requires many more stretches on that very same highway. We may even want to step on the gas a little harder. But every so often, as we take turns as co-drivers, we might also want to roll down our windows and take in the view without anxiously scanning the horizon for our destination. In an age where value is often synonymous with utility and where validation hinges on pragmatic exploitation, I see beauty in harbouring the few exceptions that exist.

As with any other form of culture, art is played with a neoliberal deck of cards. One possible rebuke to capitalism's instrumentalising grip might well be to protect art from being reduced to a mere means with ideological ends. With a little help from the imagination, the creative processes involved can stand as a testament to the intrinsic value of an inexplicable and curious existence that cares little for the imperatives of productivity and instrumentalism — a reality simply given. If anything, and perhaps naively, I continue to believe that art in its many forms can embody the same claimless poetics, where justification is neither sought nor required. The point, then, is to make art more widely accessible.

17 Messinger, p. 160.

18 Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, p. 269, note 119.

19 Sarah Rovang, 'How John Deere and Eero Saarinen Inspired Georgia O'Keefe's Largest Painting,' *Hyperallergic*, 2 April 2020.

20 Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to PostDemocracy,' *e-flux journal*, No. 21, 2010.