

Sublimation (Mainz, 14–16 Dec 17)

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz/Kunsthalle Mainz, 14.–16.12.2017

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Sublimation – Mind, Matter, Concept in Art after Modernism

During the "long Sixties," a period coined by Arthur Marwick to describe the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, artists, critics and theorists criticized established notions regarding works of art as autonomous aesthetic objects designed primarily for visual contemplation in the allegedly neutral space of a gallery. They confronted, in other words, the Modernist conception of art espoused by influential American art critic Clement Greenberg and his followers. One particular strain in this respect is the tendency to use volatile materials or substances that may evaporate or sublime, thereby destabilizing notions of the visual character and the objecthood of art. These tendencies are often subsumed within the generalizing notion about the "dematerialization" of art – a term introduced in 1968 by critics Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler. This conference seeks to address the shortcomings of this view by focusing on the complex negotiations between materiality and immateriality informing art practices of the time.

As a frame and a starting point, the conference draws on the philosophical concept of "sublimation" and explores its analytic potential for this critical reflection. In chemistry and physics, sublimation is defined as the "conversion of a substance from the solid to the gaseous state without its becoming liquid" (Encyclopedia Britannica). Beyond this literal sense, the term "sublimation" has been used to describe a psychological process with cultural and social impact in philosophy and psychoanalysis. By analyzing practices that engage with volatile materials and chemical processes against the background of contemporary philosophical reflections on sublimation, we intend to highlight the significance of matter and materiality in conceptualism and contemporaneous experimental art practices of the 1950s to 1970s in the United States and elsewhere. Our basic premise is that the concept of "sublimation" is a key term for an interdisciplinary reflection on such practices and, more fundamentally, contributes to a deeper understanding of conceptualism and other art practices that departed from Greenbergian conceptions of art. Thus, our conference aims for mutual ground upon which the disciplines of art history and philosophy may address important artistic approaches within postwar United States and international communities.

Our planned program comprises four sections that address different aspects of the topic:

(1) Sublimation and Dissolution as Art: This section will be dedicated to artists who consciously choose materials in their work that have a tendency to dissolve or sublime. Contributions will address important examples of such strategies. We will also seek to establish possible

connections with the notion of entropy as a loss of order and form that was highly influential in the period.

(2) Sublimation, Mind, and Body: This section aims at exploring the potential of psychoanalytical theories of sublimation for the analysis of the role of materiality in art after Modernism. While the term "sublimation" is often associated with spiritualization and abstraction, our focus lies on the transformation of matter, following e.g. Gaston Bachelard's concept of "material imagination."

(3) Sublimation and the Sublime: The third section focuses on "sublimation" and its relation to the notion of the sublime in art and philosophy. Taking into account the sublime's traditional association with the spiritual, and the central role it played in discussions on modernist art, connecting this important concept with the notion of sublimation seems promising in order to shed new light on conceptualism and other practices such as Land Art and their relation to materiality.

(4) Sublimation, Matter, Concept: This section will analyze how matter relates to thought, idea, or concept in conceptual, ephemeral, and process-based artistic projects of the 1950s to 1970s more generally, also addressing the question to what degree some forms of conceptualism could be regarded as strategies towards a sublimation of matter, and thus an ennoblement of art as a mainly intellectual endeavor.

Confirmed speakers:

Sabeth Buchmann, Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien

Günter Figal, Albert Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

James Nisbet, University of California, Irvine

Dominic Rahtz, University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury

Philip Shaw, University of Leicester

Marin R. Sullivan, Keene State College

Dylan Trigg, University College Dublin

Friedrich Weltzien, Hochschule Hannover

Paper proposals could address, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- What artistic practices are based on notions or processes of sublimation, or can be described using this vocabulary?
- How can the role of the artist, the recipient, or more generally authorship and subjectivity be described in this context?
- How did philosophers of the 20th century (e.g. Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan) take up the term "sublimation" in theories of subjectivity? In what way does it relate to matter and what could be its contribution to a better understanding of art?
- What is the specific value of categories such as dissolution, transition, refinement, or ennoblement for the interpretation of art?
- Which connections can be drawn between sublimation and entropy, as a loss of order and form?
- What parallels exist, with respect to the arts, between sublimation and the sublime?

Please send proposals of around 250 words for a 25-minutes paper, along with a short biography (max. 200 words), no later than September 1, 2017, to the conference organizers:

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If possible, please also indicate the section you would like to join. Announcements of acceptance will be sent by the end of September.

Travel reimbursement depends on the availability of funds.

Quellennachweis:

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