

## Sublimation – Mind, Matter, Concept in Art after Modernism

Report by: Laura Domes, Laura Gvenetadze, Christopher Nixon, Katharina Täschner

Sublimation – Mind, Matter, Concept in Art after Modernism  
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 14–16 December 2017

[report on behalf of the organisers]

“Take a chemical process, a philosophical concept, a set of artistic practices, put them together and see how they react.” This experimental idea by Annika Schlitte and Christian Berger (2017) was at the core of their interdisciplinary conference “Sublimation – Mind, Matter, Concept in Art after Modernism”, held at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz from December 14–16, 2017. With a close concentration on the term’s relation to conceptualist art practices of the 1950s to 1970s, they have brought together a wide range of international speakers, giving equal consideration to both European as well as American scholarship.

The conference’s agenda drew significantly from its dual art historical and philosophical perspective. Building on a critical reading of Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler’s 1968 notion of a “dematerialization of art”, the theoretical framework of sublimation eventually opened a fundamentally new and productive perspective on the complex interrelations of materiality and immateriality in post-war American art. Sublimation, in its various contexts, carries meanings of elevation, ennoblement, and even dissolution. Nevertheless, it is strictly bound to questions of materiality, since it always describes the transformation of matter into something else. Matter and its transformation, especially in the case of conceptualist works of the 1960s, thus play a crucial role in the production and reception of art. Accordingly, the scientific and philosophical dimensions of the term went hand in hand throughout the conference. In scientific terms, sublimation is the direct conversion of a solid substance into a gaseous state. However, sublimation most famously entered psychoanalytic discourse as defined by Sigmund Freud, who described it as the transformation of libido into artistic energy. Sublimation thus not only alludes to the increased artistic use of volatile substances throughout the “long Sixties” (Arthur Marwick), but can equally evoke a socio-cultural perspective relating to the artwork’s production as well as its reception.

The German phenomenologist Günter Figal (Freiburg) delivered the conference’s first keynote lecture. Building upon Aristotle’s thought, he developed concepts of object, matter, and space that he then applied to James Turrell’s installation “Open Field” at Chichu Art Museum in Naoshima, Japan, and on Morton Feldman’s musical composition “Rothko Chapel”. Figal argued that even the non-tangible matters of light and sound are connected to the genuine conditions of the artwork’s spatial appearance.

In his consideration of Dan Flavin’s fluorescent light installations, Vangelis Giannakakis (Frank-

furt) began the first panel by offering another perspective on Figal's thesis. Referring to Jacques Rancière's concept of the aesthetic regime of art, he focused on the split between materiality and intangibility by the example of the neon tube as a commonplace item and as an artwork. According to Giannakakis, the artwork depends on the recipient's imagination in order to sublimate the mere thingness. This emphasizes the importance of the audience and, at the same time, questions the traditional role of the artist in the creation of art. This shift of perspective is also crucial to the work of the Italian artist Piero Manzoni, as Lara Demori (Munich) demonstrated in her talk. In positioning a sublimated concept of the artist against the banality of the act of inflating a balloon, Manzoni jeopardized the concept of a preserved and authentic artwork. Anna-Rosja Haveman (Groningen) analysed "The 5 Continent documenta 7" by James Lee Byars. Protesting against Documenta's Western-centric perspective, Byars developed several performances, which are by definition ephemeral. Additionally, he sent 300 letters on fragile black paper, one of which Haveman rediscovered in the archives of the Groningen museum. Byars' work therefore illustrates the challenging relationship between an artwork's concept and its material foundation.

The second panel dealt with phenomenon of dissolution as a method of artistic labor as it relates to the term sublimation. Annemarie Kok (Groningen) showed that the complex intertwining of motion, energy, matter, creation, and destruction that David Medalla developed in the quasi self-dispersing foam-sculptures of his "Bubble Machines" was updated and enhanced in the ephemeral sculptures comprised of participants' bodies during his later collaborative and performative artwork. Thus, the collaborative process offered a complementary conception of sublimation as dissolution, which could eventually function as a social and spiritual utopia. To further examine the ways artists composed works with only the slightest trace of the material, such as air or other volatile substances, Friedrich Weltzien (Hannover) focused on works by Yves Klein, the ZERO group, and the Japanese Gutai Art Association. Departing from the physiochemical requirements of sublimation, he identified the different implications of sublimation that served as a basis for the presented artworks. Antje Krause-Wahl (Frankfurt) offered a perspective on artistic approaches to the dematerialization of the artwork itself by means of a material that actually sublimates in the physicochemical sense of the term: Judy Chicago's and James Rosenquist's works with dry ice. Citing the use of dry ice in military contexts during the Cold War era as additional context for these works, she stated that sublimation in its artistic usage could be conceived as a metaphor for dissolution in social and political instances and that it may therefore be understood as a medium of political criticism. The last presentation of the panel was given by Adi Louria Hayon (Tel Aviv), who interpreted Bruce Nauman's works as reflections on mathematician Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems. She showed that while Nauman explored the relationships between body, perception, technology and the production of knowledge within the means of art, he used the operation of sublimation as a perpetual process by continuously failing said operation.

The third Panel concentrated on the bodily experience of artwork and time, processes of sublimation that take place in the body of the viewer, and in the bodies of paintings. Closely connected to this are psychoanalytical concepts that try to answer the question about the function of art and its relation to the psychological object – ideas of practice (discipline) and theory (doctrine). Christa Noel Robbins (Charlottesville) showed how Kenneth Noland's series of circular paintings could be meant for practical use in psychoanalytical therapy and were therefore intended to provoke a physical reaction in the viewer by means of the artworks' "hypnotic opticality". The act of psychological sublimation thus begins in the eye of the beholder. Martin Barré's non-figurative paintings,

as interpreted by Claire Salles (Paris), create a similar experience. By confronting the beholder with the thickness of paint and halo-like pentimenti on unprimed canvas, Barré destabilizes the viewer's notions of foreground and background, and thereby plays a role in criticizing the Greenbergian notion of "flatness" as the most essential quality of painting. Speaking in Lacanian terms, these paintings, far from having any concrete use or function, are elevated objects that bring the viewer nearer to the "thing".

Lynn M. Somers (Madison, NY) pointed out that Louise Bourgeois' "Janus" series is closely connected to the concept of transformation that constitutes sublimation. Bourgeois' ambisexual sculptures made of 'noble' materials recall the tradition of male Western sculptors, while at the same time destabilizing the viewer with their ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning. Bourgeois' strong interest in psychoanalysis lets us perceive her art-making as a cathartic experimentation. Art, a form of neurosis, can be understood as a passion transformed, as Freud had stated. Another approach to art is bound to the experience of time. In his works on elements, Gaston Bachelard used the term "nostalgia" to describe the series of fragments that constitute time – which is, for Bachelard, a personal concept that each individual must work to grasp. Dylan Trigg (Vienna) talked about different concepts of duration, nostalgia for a lost world, and Bachelard's poetic instant with respect to Joel Sternfeld's polaroid photographs of traumatic places. Nevertheless, his concept of vertical time cannot free itself of a certain valorisation embedded in the notions of up/down or high/low.

James Nisbet's (Irvine) second keynote lecture on Robert Barry's "Inert Gas Series" addressed an archetypical example of an artwork from the 1960s that focuses on the alleged dissolution of matter. The inert gases released by the artist expanded infinitely, almost dissolving completely, but without allowing the molecules to mix with the atmosphere. The concept of "sublimation" thus helped explain the fundamental leap in the reception of Barry's work from an environmental to an ecological perspective. Taking into account the large number of posters, photographs, and other documents that are the material traces of Barry's performance, Nisbet argued that it may be understood as "sublimating" from the strict boundaries of its own specific environment to the wider field of (material and personal) interconnectedness and relativity.

The Kunsthalle Mainz hosted the fourth and last panel of the conference. Seated amongst the site-specific works of Daniel Buren and Bettina Pousttchi on display at the Kunsthalle, the four speakers reflected on different relationships between matter and concept, with a strong emphasis on sculptural practices, Land Art, and photography. Julia Polyck-O'Neill (St. Catharines) began the day with a close and highly contextualized reading of Rosi Braidotti's philosophical theories. In order to explore the potential of photography to construct subjectivity, she analysed works by Jeff Wall with respect to their inherent conceptions of the photographic medium as epistemic and ontological. Polyck-O'Neill argued that this opposition could address conceptual photography's relationship to notions of the subject. The talks by Andrew Chesher (London) and Dominic Rahtz (Canterbury) that followed then opened complementary perspectives on situation- and process-oriented artistic practices. On the one hand, Chesher carried out an archaeology of Robert Morris' changing phenomenological approaches to sculpture in his article series "Notes on Sculpture" and the essay "Anti-Form". On the other, Rahtz took up Chesher's observation of a "desublimation of Gestalt" in Morris' writings and focused on shifting processes in Richard Serra's "Splashing". Referring to Dan Graham and philosopher Gilbert Simondon's idea of "in-formation", he

argued for a temporal understanding of material formation that considers changing constellations of artist, work, and viewer. A similar approach to sculpture in the 1960s also motivated Marin R. Sullivan's (Keene, NH) case study of Robert Smithson's "Asphalt Rundown". In her talk, she analysed photography's role in the transformation of the work, allowing it to exist in multiple registers of a complex multimedia system. Rather than clearly prioritizing its photographic manifestation or the action itself, Sullivan clarified how Smithson's ambiguous use of photography could direct the viewers' experience towards the sensation of an "elsewhere" or towards an abstraction of the earthwork at hand, even though in Smithson's artistic agenda the photographic medium as such only serves as a means to an end.

It became clear during the conference that sublimation is indeed a helpful term for describing and understanding the transformational processes of matter in conceptualist artworks of the long 1960s. The correlation between matter and energy that is inherent to sublimation emerged in many of the presentations, which then thematised different types of energy such as temperature, electricity, and labour. Of paramount importance was the question of containment, because the artists under consideration worked with diffuse materials that they then framed or contained (even if it were only within the "system" of art). Finally, the concept of sublimation illuminates two important dimensions that constitute the artwork and its institutional perception: one physical (what is happening in an artwork?), and one theoretical (what is happening to an artwork?). Both as physicochemical process and as personal experience, sublimation questions the gap, shift, and transfer between two states of matter.

Further information on the conference:

<http://sublimation.uni-mainz.de>

Recommended Citation:

Laura Domes, Laura Gvenetadze, Christopher Nixon, Katharina Täschner: [Conference Report of:] Sublimation - Mind, Matter, Concept in Art after Modernism. In: ArtHist.net, May 24, 2018 (accessed Aug 4, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/18222>>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>