

IMPERCEIVISM

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Imperceivism is a strategy in the creative and performing arts involving interdisciplinary artworks that are not directly perceivable to our senses (the term 'imperceivable' rather than 'imperceptible' is used because it suggests a closer relation with the perceiver). It is possible for these artworks to contain perceivable elements, but only with the purpose to emphasize the immaterial aspect, which is the defining trait of the artwork. Imperceivable artworks are not perceivable in the past, present or future, it is not about the art being temporary. This strategy is related to abstract movements like conceptualism, minimalism and the Fluxus art movement.

The objectives of artists in the imperceivism narrative are often related to finding the essence of art by exploring its boundaries. Hereby, artists in imperceivism push the limits of abstraction. The artworks also challenge human perception and conceptual apprehension of the audience by heavily relying on the sensibility of the perceiver. Because of this, the art is usually made with a provoking and experimental philosophical attitude. The creation of imperceivable art can also be seen as a reaction against our society's fixation on material value.

The strategy imperceivism will be discussed in detail by the means of various interdisciplinary artworks that encompass and thereby establish the qualities of imperceivism. First, the place of imperceivism in art will be discussed, including the role of the artist, art and perceiver. This topic is concluded by the definition of imperceivable art in various disciplines. Second, Yves Klein is discussed as one of the first artists of imperceivism. He opened the discussion around the value of immaterial art which is most relevant today. Lastly, the opportunities, restrictions and issues in imperceivism are explored and discussed through the theme of nothingness. This leads to the future of this narrative.

THE PLACE OF IMPERCEIVISM IN ART

Artists and their relation to the material

Artists are creators, making it hard to imagine an artist without artwork. Artists create something out of nothing during their creative process. In this process, the importance often lies in a final resulting art object that is directly perceivable by our senses. This is deemed the artwork and is showcased in museums and galleries. But what is there before the process and during it? It begs the question of when the artwork starts to being. Does an artwork in the making, when it is only a concept, not exist? Then if a final tangible result is never achieved does this make a non-artwork?

Pushing art to its concept



Artwork Fountain by Marcel Duchamp (1917)

Marcel Duchamp explored and pushed these boundaries of what art is and can be in a playful way. With his artworks, among them the notorious readymade *Fountain* (1917), he established that everything can be art if the artist says it is. With this statement, the focus in art shifts from the perceivable final result to the artistic intention of the artist. The execution of the art is reduced to little importance, till the point that it does not matter if the artwork is executed by the artist himself.

Yoko Ono leveraged this belief with her *Instructions for Paintings* (1962). The work consists of 22 short instructions for artworks. These are ideas or concepts for physical works. A few instructions are realised for exhibitions. Ono did not have to be present at the execution of the artworks in the exhibition space. During the exhibition, visitors could even take the instructions with them and realise the works at home. Visitors who tried this could be surprised to find that some of the instructions are impossible to realise, therefore some works will always stay conceptual. This proves that the focus of this project lies on the concept. Ono's goal is to engage the perceiver's imagination to think of what the paintings could be. Thereby the artist is able to communicate the art almost directly to the audience, without any interfering media. The perceivers of the artwork create the art in their minds and become the artwork themselves.

LINE PIECE I

Draw a line.
Erase the line.

LINE PIECE II

Erase lines.

LINE PIECE III

Draw a line with yourself.
Go on drawing until you disappear.

Artwork Instructions for Paintings by Yoko Ono (1962)

The perceiver as co-creator of the art

Art is known for its highly subjective nature. Besides its ability to evoke different emotional responses, the initial perception of the artwork will be different among individuals. Think about the context of the exhibition space, our biological differences, personality or simply the matters of the day that influence

our momentary mindset. All these factors influence how we perceive, interpret and understand stimuli. Because the stimuli are always interpreted by our minds, the perceiver could be seen as the medium and eventually the (co-)creator of the artwork that is experienced. In imperceivism there are little to no sensory stimuli to perceive and because of this, the role of the audience is exaggerated. Active (mental) engagement is needed to make sense of the intangible works. The lack of sensory impulses awakes our curiosity and hereby involves the audience, encouraging them to wonder and interact. Artists in imperceivism see the possibilities this gives them, free from the material object that in their eyes often restricts and distracts from true art.

The artwork of Tom Friedman *Untitled (a curse)* (1992) is an interesting example of how an immaterial artwork can be interpreted and co-created by the perceiver. Friedman's work consists of a plinth where a practising witch has cast an invisible curse above. There was nothing tangible to perceive when it was exhibited. Nevertheless, people reported unease and a chilling feeling when close to the loaded artwork.



Artwork *Untitled (a curse)* by Tom Friedman (1992)

Defining the imperceivable



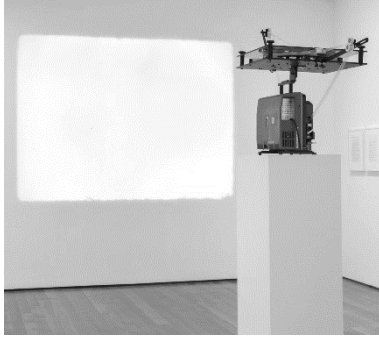
Artwork *Untitled (Horse)* by Bruno Jacob (2003)

Artworks in imperceivism can be immaterial (no material) or hypermaterial (transcending the material). Because of this, our senses cannot directly perceive the work. An example of immaterial art is the work of Robert Barry, he used radio waves, radioactive rays, electromagnetic fields, gases and thoughts in his oeuvre. Another example is Bruno Jacob who is a painter who fills his canvasses with energy, light, brainwaves, touch or love. He created an interesting dynamic with the object he portrays in his painting of a horse, *Untitled (Horse)* (2003). The work consisted of a blank canvas that Jacob presented to the horse it depicts metaphysically.



Artwork *4'33"* by John Cage (1952)

In the discipline of music, a famous piece is the composition *4'33"* by John Cage (1952). In the performance, everything is prepared to play. The lights dim and the instrument is tuned but when music is expected, silence reigns for exactly 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Related to Cage's composition, Nam June Paik created *Zen for Film* (1965). In this case, after a brief countdown, the screen stays empty instead of the expected film images. Only the occasional dust in the film roll flashes on screen.



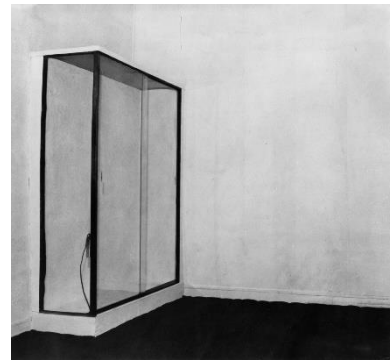
Artwork Zen for Film by Nam June Paik (1965)

In the previously mentioned artworks, some material residue that frames the immaterial art can still be perceived (such as the dust on Paik's film), although it only serves the immaterial aspect of the art. In some artworks, the physical artefacts are discarded entirely and a finite or infinite space can be declared as art. Think of the cursed artwork of Tom Friedman or the exhibition known as *Le Vide* by Yves Klein.

THE ORIGIN OF IMPERCEIVISM

Exploring the void

Yves Klein was one of the first artists to explore nothingness and with that one of the first artists in the imperceivism narrative. In 1958 he organised a popular but controversial exhibition known as *Le Vide* (*The Void*) in which the visitors were presented with an empty exhibition space. No perceivable artworks were presented, but some visitors said to experience the artist's aura.



Artwork known as *Le Vide* (*The Void*) by Yves Klein (1958)

The financial aspect of immaterial art

After this success, Klein started to sell imaginary spaces as *Zones of immaterial pictorial Sensibility*. With this project, Klein added an interesting discussion to the imperceivism narrative around the financial value of imperceivable art. His project consisted of the following transactions. Klein had defined imaginary spaces that could be bought. The buyer received an ownership certificate of the space if Klein was paid in gold. However, to complete the transaction the ownership certificate should then be burned. If this choice was made, Klein in exchange would throw half of the gold in the Seine to make up the natural balance.



Artwork *Zone de Sensibilité picturale immatérielle* (*Zones of immaterial pictorial Sensibility*) by Yves Klein (1959)

How imperceivism conquers the digital art world of today

A remarkable analogy here is the NFT that is popular today. If an NFT is bought, the owner earns a unique certificate of ownership. Particular here is that the digital art itself can easily be copied and owned by anyone downloading it on their computer, which makes it questionable what is seen as the artwork and what truly has value in this construction.

Damien Hirst recently explored this by launching an NFT collection *The Currency* (2021). In the collection of 10,000 NFTs, each digital work corresponded with a physical artwork Hirst created. As with Klein's imaginary spaces, the buyers of Hirst's works were presented with a choice after the payment transaction. They could keep their NFT, or exchange it for the physical artwork. Almost half of the buyers chose to keep their NFT and Hirst personally burned these 4,851 physical pieces of his art. In this manner, he completed the transformation of the material artworks to the immaterial energy that fuels the digital NFTs.



Artwork1 *The Currency* by Damien Hirst (2021)

The value of immaterial art

Imperceivism refutes our obsession with the visible and concrete. In our society, we attach economical value to material objects. By dematerialising art, artists can try to escape this economic sphere and adhere to their pure artistic intention. This is another approach to exploring the essence of art and finding ways to communicate with the perceiver through as little obstruction as possible. Surprisingly, Yves Klein claimed to do the same by separating the financial aspect of his art in the *Zone of immaterial pictorial Sensibility* project and containing it in the certificate of ownership, freeing the art itself of the tainting economic pressure to be sellable. This creates a fascinating paradox for artists in imperceivism who want to achieve the same goal with opposing approaches.

THE FUTURE OF IMPERCEIVISM

The opportunities in nothingness

By working with the metaphysical, the focus in the art shifts to the concept instead of the created art object. Because physical representational aspects of art are released, new opportunities arise to epitomise abstract concepts such as nothingness and infinity. Universal concepts like these are intriguing because of their intangible nature. They are interesting themes for artists who try to grasp the essence of art and our reality. Using the imperceivable, artists may aim for a perfect and immersive experience of reality and communicate this directly with the audience, without any external medium standing in between.

Nothingness with an artist's touch



Artwork *Invisible Sculpture* by Andy Warhol (1985)

One problem with this ideology is the diminishing potential for uniqueness when aiming for one paradigm of art or a defining representation of our reality. If the epitome of art comes down to impeccable nothingness, what creative space is left for the artist's own touch? An explanatory occurrence is the invisible sculpture. Multiple artists among which Andy Warhol and more recently Salvatore Garau, independently created this invisible artwork. In the end, although created by different artists, the resulting sculptures have no perceivable difference.

Moreover, the *Invisible Book* by Elisabeth Tonnard (2012), would not have any perceivable difference compared to the invisible sculptures either.

Will nothingness be the end of imperceivable artworks?

Another question is if pure imperceivable and immaterial nothingness is even possible to achieve in art. Even when devoid of stimuli, our brains will eventually generate phantom shapes and sounds on their own. Besides this, nothingness always appears to be a result of what once was, could or will be. Often residues like shadows and echoes give this away, such as the twitches and blinking of the dancers in one of Merce Cunningham's still choreographies *Shards* (1987). Because of this, it seems impossible to perceive nothingness entirely as itself.



Members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company performing

After all, as our finite capacity might never be able to create or apprehend the infinite, art in imperceivism might be doomed to literary end in nothingness.