

Andres Ugartechea

Professor Michael Shiloh

Performing Robots

October 28th, 2023

## Of Sisyphus, Robots and Absurdism

---

Art and philosophy find a vanishing point in the discussion of human condition. In this intersection, the question of the meaning and purpose of life keeps tormenting both artists and philosophers. In this regard, the Hong Kong and London-based contemporary artist, Kachi Chan, portrays his absurd understanding of the world through his art installation, *"Sisyphus"*. In a similar vein, the Algerian-French philosopher, Albert Camus, drew inspiration from *"The Myth of Sisyphus"* to develop his philosophy of the absurdism. Although one century apart, these two thinkers converge in the exploration of human labor as the main component to comprehend the meaning of life. This essay aims to study the connection between Kachin Chan and Albert Camus existential ideas through their interpretation of Sisyphus, highlighting the parallels in their focus on resistance against oppressive forces to present an absurd interpretation of human existence.

### **Kachi Chan's *"Sisyphus"* Art Installation**

In 2022, Kachi Chan presented his *"Sisyphus"*, an art installation that captivated the audience with an interesting interaction between two distinct robotic systems<sup>1</sup>. The installation serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of construction and

---

<sup>1</sup> Chan, Kachi. "Sisyphus: A Robotic Art Installation in Endless Interaction with Power and Resistance." *Designboom*, 5 Aug. 2022, [www.designboom.com/art/sisyphus-robotic-art-installation-endless-interaction-power-resistance-08-05-2022/](https://www.designboom.com/art/sisyphus-robotic-art-installation-endless-interaction-power-resistance-08-05-2022/).

deconstruction, offering as well a visual interpretation of the Greek myth of Sisyphus: a king who became infamous after escaping death twice, getting sentenced by the gods to face the eternal task of rolling a rock uphill only to let it fall and start again<sup>2</sup>. Inspired by this image, Kachi Chan displays large robots that continuously demolish the bricks arches constructed by the smaller robots. Despite the destruction, the smaller robots persist in rebuilding. This interaction between these two species of robots mirrors the oppressive forces overpowering the efforts of the oppressed. The persistence of the smaller robots signify collective resistance and resilience. Through these mechanics, Kachi Chan makes us think of the continuous clash between systems of authority and resistance, present in human society. Kachi Chan's visual representation encapsulates the essence of the battle against oppressive forces that gives meaning to life, echoing Camus' ideas on his philosophy of the absurd.

### **Albert Camus' Philosophy of Absurdism**

Albert Camus defines absurdism *"as the futility of a search for meaning in an incomprehensible universe, devoid of God, or meaning"*<sup>3</sup>. His philosophical work is based on the understanding that the human being quest for meaning is paradoxical to our seemingly indifferent and absurd world. His philosophical essays present Sisyphus as the hero of absurdism for his capability of illustrating the eternal struggle and futility of human existence. Sisyphus, condemned to an eternal task that brings no outcomes other than physical deterioration, works as a magnifying glass to reveal how our capitalist society values labor and productivity as the main purpose of each person.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cartwright, Mark. "Sisyphus." *World History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.worldhistory.org#organization>, 29 Mar. 2023, [www.worldhistory.org/sisyphus/#:~:text=Definition&text=Sisyphus%20\(or%20Sisyphos\)%20is%20a,in%20the%20depths%20of%20Hades](https://www.worldhistory.org/sisyphus/#:~:text=Definition&text=Sisyphus%20(or%20Sisyphos)%20is%20a,in%20the%20depths%20of%20Hades).

<sup>3</sup> Editor, OUPblog. "Albert Camus and the Problem of Absurdity." *OUPblog*, 18 June 2020, [blog.oup.com/2019/05/albert-camus-problem-absurdity/#:~:text=Camus%20defined%20the%20absurd%20as,universes%20refusal%20to%20provide%20that](http://blog.oup.com/2019/05/albert-camus-problem-absurdity/#:~:text=Camus%20defined%20the%20absurd%20as,universes%20refusal%20to%20provide%20that).

Despite his condition, Albert Camus states that one shouldn't pity Sisyphus. The philosopher describes Sisyphus with a positivity character, suggesting that it's by acknowledging that his struggle is eternal that he could find true freedom. In this way, Albert Camus explains that absurdism is inherent in life, therefore one should embrace the futility of life, such as by not taking things very seriously, to achieve happiness.

Albert Camus' and Kachi Chan's representations of the myth of Sisyphus underscore the resilient nature of human beings confronted with the pursuit of meaning in what they both perceive to be an inherently absurd life. While Albert Camus argues that Sisyphus discovered a form of liberation within the embracement of absurdism, Kachi Chan's art installation visualizes a similar perspective in the way in which the smaller robots embody resistance and a pursuit of change. The continuous struggle of the smaller robots to rebuild, despite enduring repeated destruction by the larger robots, illustrates a collective sense of resilience and hope, qualities that, within the framework of Albert Camus' absurdism, can be interpreted as source of happiness.

In conclusion, this converge in their portrayals represents the never-ending struggle of human beings in an absurd world, showcasing resilience, resistance, and the potential for finding happiness in the acknowledgment of absurdism: the meaningless nature of life. The utilization of mechanics to depict societal conditions is a prevalent topic in robotic art. This short essay's thesis can be further explored in the art of Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, particularly in their piece *"Can't Help Myself"*. This artwork features a robotic arm that, while leaking and expending all its energy to collect spilled liquid, serves as a reflection of a society aligning with the principles of absurdism.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Hampsink, Iris&nbsp;Olde. "Can't Help Myself – How a Relatable Robot Offers a Critical Reflection on Modern Society." *Diggit Magazine*, 28 Feb. 2022, [www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/can-t-help-myself-how-relatable-robot-offers-critical-reflection-modern-society](http://www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/can-t-help-myself-how-relatable-robot-offers-critical-reflection-modern-society).

## Bibliography

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, Albert Camus. 1955.

Cartwright, Mark. "Sisyphus." *World History Encyclopedia*,  
<https://www.worldhistory.org#organization>, 29 Mar. 2023,  
[www.worldhistory.org/sisyphus/#:~:text=Definition&text=Sisyphus%20\(or%20Sisyp%20is%20a,in%20the%20depths%20of%20Hades](https://www.worldhistory.org/sisyphus/#:~:text=Definition&text=Sisyphus%20(or%20Sisyp%20is%20a,in%20the%20depths%20of%20Hades).

Chan, Kachi. "Sisyphus: A Robotic Art Installation in Endless Interaction with Power and Resistance." *Designboom*, 5 Aug. 2022,  
[www.designboom.com/art/sisyphus-robotic-art-installation-endless-interaction-power-resistance-08-05-2022/](https://www.designboom.com/art/sisyphus-robotic-art-installation-endless-interaction-power-resistance-08-05-2022/).

Editor, OUPblog. "Albert Camus and the Problem of Absurdity." *OUPblog*, 18 June 2020,  
[blog.oup.com/2019/05/albert-camus-problem-absurdity/#:~:text=Camus%20defined%20the%20absurd%20as,universe's%20refusal%20to%20provide%20that](https://blog.oup.com/2019/05/albert-camus-problem-absurdity/#:~:text=Camus%20defined%20the%20absurd%20as,universe's%20refusal%20to%20provide%20that).

Hampsink, Iris Olde. "Can't Help Myself – How a Relatable Robot Offers a Critical Reflection on Modern Society." *Diggit Magazine*, 28 Feb. 2022,  
[www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/can-t-help-myself-how-relatable-robot-offers-critical-reflection-modern-society](https://www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/can-t-help-myself-how-relatable-robot-offers-critical-reflection-modern-society).