

Dan Landrum February 10, 2018 at 6:20am ·

Why I Am Out of the Art Conversation

The world is increasingly polarizing between the myth of the rational and the myth of the faithful. The confrontation between religious faith and the modern scientific world is not going away. It's time to break the spell.

Culturally from its inception Art has served the magical, the religious, the superstitious powers. Currently — art for art's sake, art for the love of it aside — art culturally predominantly serves commercial interests, and as an artificial marketplace for moneyed interest to sink their exorbitant gains into inflated and distorted values.

By far, in the modern era, the aspect of art most employed is absurdity. Absurdity has long had its place in art as a wedge to break the magic thinking spell. From Aristophanes in classical Greece to the Dadaists in World War 1, absurdity spoke truth to power. But now the truth of that power has been usurped. Look at advertising, especially TV. Most commercials are surreal. Go to the world class art shows, to the big New York City galleries, museums and auctions that define the art market. The vast majority of what you see will be absurd, surreal, otherworldly -- unreal. The place of art as subversive reason speaking truth to power has been turned on its head. The Joke is on art. Absurdity has saturated what entertains us. But when it reaches the point that we elect an Absurdity to the Supreme Seat of Power, the bully pulpit that defines what is and isn't Fake News, there is no longer reason or cause, there is no longer reason or cause to speak. It's futile to argue with Absurdity when it holds the ultimate upper hand.

"Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities," Voltaire

Art can have many other functions, but when absurdity has its finger on the nuclear button that could annihilate us all ... it's time to stop and mourn the loss.

[Arne Wilson](#) There is a great deal of substance to this argument. Absurdity destroys any sense of the normative order even as it represents and interprets normative orders declining into chaos. Absurdity in art and absurdity in power may be two faces of the same coin.

I regret that Durkheim's notion of anomia never received the theoretical development it should have. To lose a sense of normativity may well lead to what Voltaire feared--although he may have had a different notion of the absurd. If no rules seem to hold, then what rules can accomplish for the good may be set aside.

Deliberate absurdity can induce that anomic state from which atrocities and apathy alike can develop.

[Arne Wilson](#) Alienation implies that one's interests which should be rationally served have been commandeered by the irrationalities of society.

Anomia means that nobody has any rules in terms of which they can exercise reason and that means they can neither discern their interests nor settle on any actions to achieve them.

Absurdity may be an organon of that or a symptom.

[Arne Wilson](#) The German and the French terms are more insightful than our hackneyed English. *Entfremdung* implies that one is a stranger to one's own reason and is estranged from one's own interests. *Anomie* refers to the decay of all norms in terms of which, no doubt, reason and purpose become debatable.

[Arne Wilson](#) The absurd would play a role in both, orderly notions and orderly reason would be defeated by both. Hence, *l'absurde*.

[Dan Landrum](#): [Arne](#), I'm arguing here that "We the people" have strayed into a mindset that presents a clear & present danger to us all, to the people, to the planet, to life as we know it. And that our Art is culpable, our art, via the absurd, reflects, if not generates the escape into fantasy and unreality, rather than encourage thoughtful dives into reason and legitimacy. I'm calling for a penetrating look into how a Post-absurd approach to speaking truth to power might develop, in Art and beyond.

In philosophy Existentialism has hijacked Absurdism to mean the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any. In this context absurd does not mean "logically impossible", but rather "humanly impossible."

Like P. D. Ouspensky*, I'm looking for a science that can stretch beyond the limit of our senses "to derive the possibility of something beyond ordinary human effort entirely." Something beyond ordinary human effort entirely, yet inclusive of common sense.

In another perspective, Francis Bacon* says "Great boldness is seldom without some absurdity." By which he means, truly new innovations or radical hypothesis seldom appears reasonable or rational to the limits of our current understanding.

But in "Why I Am Out of the Art Conversation," I'm using the absurd in the more usual sense: the quality or state of being ridiculous, synonyms: preposterousness, ridiculousness, ludicrousness, inappropriateness, idiocy, stupidity, foolishness, folly, silliness, inanity, insanity; unreasonableness, irrationality, illogicality, pointlessness, senselessness; informal: craziness, "these artworks convey a sense of the absurdity of contemporary life."

Even our most erudite 'reasonable' thinkers can lead us into corrosive 'bad science' absurdity. One example: biological determinism.**

Yes, anomie, as a social condition in which there is a disintegration or disappearance of the norms and values that were previously common to the society. The concept Durkheim developed, thought of as "normlessness," that anomie occurs during and follows periods of drastic and rapid changes to the social, economic, or political structures of society is a significant insight.

However, here I'm looking at a more protractive, enduring perspective. I'm arguing for a sense of reason within a definition of reality that serves the consensual common good of "we the people" in all times or political structures. This post-absurd thing I'm looking for is implicitly understood by most reasonable people. It is truly fair & balanced, just and caring. Yes, it may look back for foundation in Jeffersonian Democracy, including core ideals such as, "citizens have a civic duty to aid the state and resist corruption, especially monarchism and aristocracy." But more, and more universally, it recognizes at the people level, folks all truly share common humanity. As a dear friend says, "We share common, benevolent hopes and constructive aspirations. In direct dealings with people I find that we all share a love of life, love of family and friends, hope for a better future, and a respect and sense of responsibility for our planet."

Only one US president founded a university, Thomas Jefferson. Other universities of the day allowed only three choices of specialization: Medicine, Law, and Religion. Under Jefferson's guidance, the University of Virginia became the first in the United States to allow specializations in such diverse fields as Astronomy, Architecture, Botany, Philosophy, and Political Science. Jefferson explained, "This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

That's the guide post, the touchstone, the bedrock I'm looking to in order to imagine a civic post-absurd discourse. That's the framework and perspective that the New Art would need to take to draw me back into the conversation.

*NOTES: "The Baconian method is an example of the application of investigative inductive reasoning. The method was put forward in Bacon's book *Novum Organum* (1620), or 'New Method', and was supposed to replace the methods put forward in Aristotle's *Organon*." P. D. Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*, a study of metaphysics, or rather, to exceed the limits of the same by his "psychological method", which he defines as "a calibration of the tools of human understanding to derive the actual meaning of the thing itself." This term is one of three high concepts of the material presented, along with "the esoteric method" which as he sums up depends on the first to derive the possibility of something beyond ordinary human effort entirely. In high concept terms: "The idea of esotericism ... holds that the very great majority of our ideas are not the product of evolution but the product of the degeneration of ideas which existed at some time or are still existing somewhere in much higher, purer and more complete forms."

** On biological determinism, a great book by Steven J. Gould called *The Mismeasure of Man** exposes the bad science. But we still have this ideology persisting today. James Herron: These pseudo-scientific forms of racism purported to show that there were natural, biological differences between human groups. In fact, that's what anthropology was for 100 years— a sort of "racial science." The discipline classified various racial groups in a [absurd] hierarchy of moral/intellectual capacity.

[Arne Wilson](#) Years ago, decades ago, sociologists and anthropologists debated whether or not there were substantive differences between the two fields. They concluded that "sociology was white and anthropology was black." They were joking, but the point was deadly serious.

[Arne Wilson](#) My approach to the whole matter is to look at the paradoxical nature of self-reference and to the dilemmas that seem to ensue because of the imperfect character of all self-referential systems. I find that basic to the discussion of our power of action and to power in general. If power is collective, then the manner in which we treat dilemmas of action reflect the dilemmas of power. The manner in which those dilemmas are collectively distributed in action, especially in our speech forms, resembles fundamental notions of class. Much of class theory and apologetics for the intentions and consequences of class and conduct in terms of class suggests that so much of class involves the distribution of arational or absurd considerations.

Paul Goodman sixty years ago had a fine title for it: **Growing up Absurd**.

I find three notions essential--a material or natural order, that is, the physical order of existence, a formal or arbitrary order of an essentially mathematical character, and an order of mental or conscious life we can label psychic or phenomenological or noetic or fantastical depending on our tastes. The first is real and empirical, the second is real but not empirical, and the third exists in the unreal and the non-empirical which may be realized in action that is "about" the others.

If not one of them necessarily corresponds perfectly to any of the others or even one other, there exists an eternal question of the absurdity of our actions. Action in terms of class, that is, power, makes use of absurdity in its attempts to perfect itself.

If we deal with anything of an economic, political, ethical, or rhetorical character in the process of **poiesis** of becoming, doing, making another state, we require self-referentiality and the exercise of power in the course of actions which are intrinsically collective, then we are engaged in the process of the **poiesis** of the absurd as much as we are engaged in reason. That covers the **poiesis** of everything from the most ineffable notions to the most calculable. Absurdity is inescapable.

[Dan Landrum](#) Absurdity may well be inescapable, but what is the effect when it tips the balance? When absurdity is so pervasive, so ingrained that there is enough of us that we can elect and not see the Wacky Emperor has no clothes, and collectively we can't conscientiously re-calibrate reasonable human decency and values in the common good?

[Arne Wilson](#) I don't know, Dan Landrum. It becomes a kind of race to the bottom, a death spiral, when the very reason needed to recapture democratic governance itself has been undermined by the loss of democratic commitments. The less democracy, the faster the decline. The faster the decline, the fewer resources democracy has to effect a recovery. It's like a drunk or addict headed for rock bottom. There's no form of intervention that democracy can summon--only a massive refusal on the part of the members of that democratic order to tolerate any further abuse and that usually only happens when things have hit rock bottom and then it's too late.

[Arne Wilson](#) If we assume at the outset that there are only individuals and that everything of a collective character is dependent on what amounts to contractual arrangements between them, then there is no collective reality and, hence, no collective interest or public concerns to offset private interest and private convictions. The outcome is anomia. If there's no assumption of collective reality to begin with, then conclusions will be drawn that no collective interest exists--some Hidden Hand will provide.

If all that matters are contractual arrangements there is no moral order to assure that those individuals will not lie and cheat, steal and kill if it is to their advantage and there exists no collective counterweight. Those non-rational actors will succumb to intimidation and the irrationality it fosters. Anomia is followed by alienation. Alienation fosters even more absurdity and collectively acceptable conduct becomes whatever private interests chose to make of it.

The outcome is likely a Hobbesian war of each against all and the most powerful will prevail. A nation of radical individualists becomes a radically collective order of domination--and there is nothing in that either that doesn't make for ample opportunity for the dominant class itself to succumb to its own absurdities. If you argue, for example, that the cure for the ills of free enterprise is still more free enterprise, then the poison becomes the cure and the sick become sicker still in their pursuit of what these individualists consider a better society.

Have another drink!

[Dan Landrum](#)

Sandra: "Do you mean representational or realistic art?"

Yes Sandra, absurdity springs from both the trompe l'oeil illusion fooling the viewer into mistaking it for reality and in the fictional storytelling interpretation of that illusion. Magritte's 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' makes the first point, and Kehinde Wiley's Obama portrait is an example of the later.



"The art of illusion, or trompe l'oeil, as it is more commonly known, presents a scene in order to fool the viewer into mistaking it for reality. [...] But what happens in perceiving a trompe l'oeil painting? In the moment of recognition, when we see what we took for reality is in fact an illusion, the fabric of the presentation is torn open and once again we are looking 'as through a glass darkly.' It is as though the Middle Ages has suddenly reared up and we are given proof that life is an illusion and that we can't trust our senses to gain true knowledge. These trompe l'oeil magic tricks of illusion act as mirrors we hold to laugh at ourselves for being fooled, and they reveal a certain amount of disquietude on the part of those who paint them and those who in the Renaissance commissioned their construction."

~<http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/.../>

Kehinde Wiley's Obama portrait controversy proves Americans struggle to engage with art. "Audiences think contemporary paintings should be easily understandable for anyone with eyes. But this is not the case."

"Viewers who think they should be able to easily read and understand high-style portraiture but reject Wiley's previous work also likely don't understand how painting radically changed in the last century. After World War II, artistic production in general — and painting in particular — became much more complex. Artists began to pursue experimental, radical, unorthodox approaches to making art, to forming culture, to reimagining society. Wiley's work comes out of this tradition of questioning and remixing his cultural inheritance." ~ <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/kehinde-wiley-s-obama-portrait-controversy-shows-americans-don-t-ncna849156>

[Arne Wilson](#) We wander the fine line between the metaphorical and the dialectical, between mathematical thought and the physical order of being. There's a phrase owing to Coleridge, "the suspension of disbelief," and it gains strength from that distinction.

A metaphor states that something "is" even though we do not believe it is that about which it states something. We do suspend disbelief every time we use a metaphor.

If we use a simile or like device, we do not suspend disbelief. We believe we are deal with the reason and substance of stuff by such an instrumentality.

We recognize a metaphor but we puzzle out a simile. There may be two different forms of neurological processing involved. If you make an analogy, you stand right on that ineffable line, convinced one moment that it is a model of reality and real, and the next that it is a sort of informed speculation that might become real.

[Arne Wilson](#) The same is true I think of the visual and audible arts. They are not real and yet they are. We do not suspend belief that they "mean" even if we do not believe that we can say or touch what that meaning is.

The art work is the first expression of *poesis*, the "making or doing of something that is present about which we find "representative" aspects and through which we "interpret" what is present to our attention. If those art works, become conventionalized, we enter into the world of our innumerable rhetorics, those presentations, representations and interpretations that we find "persuasive" and create a state of thought, feeling and wanting that would not exist without its presence rendered as some kind of speech form. Music talks, persuades. Painting speaks and influences us. They have meaning because they may change the very nature of our actions.

At that point, we enter into the realm of the ethical, those dilemmas that art resolves in some coherent work or simply states something as unique as they are. If we know how each other finds meaning when we share, if only in our minds those imaginaries, then we enter art and art enters us as something political, for we influence each other's conduct in ways that we might not be influenced alone. And there is an economy of art--it is astonishing how such a work can mean so much using after all what so often is so very little. Is there anything more economical than art?

That would be an Aristotelian sequence: poetics, rhetorics, ethics, politics, economics. Depending on our "dramatic" encounters with them, we may either move into a realm of the theatrical in which we can disbelieve if we choose or treat as strategy which is how we believe that we can exercise our powers of action. And again, in so doing, we wander that fine line between the metaphoric-dialectical and the kind of reasoning that is logical-mathematical in nature. How we make it physical is as endless as the physical itself.

[Dan Landrum](#): [Arne](#), it's the generational compounding complexity of the self-manufactured fictions that makes Seph Rodney's comment ring all the more true, "Audiences think contemporary paintings should be easily understandable for anyone with eyes. But this is not the case."

Below* is a very few of the top samplings when you Google "Obama portrait reviews." These are all paid, implying informed, reviews. They are a secondary art form depending, yet living separate lives from the original painting. A sort of idea farm harvesting from the soils of the real physical object. The reviews tell a story, each a different story, but presumably a story informed from knowledge of the art history of portrait paintings, a history which is itself built on stories previously told, for which the writers most likely had no direct relationship with. The reviewers all have a different set of stories, references and sources from which they make up their story. Fiction fabricating fiction. These current stories of the Obama portraits are more different from one another than similar in their point of view, disagree more than agree on what the meaning, value or message is of the original work. They provide more of a Rorschach inkblot test of significance beyond the subjective experiences of the writers than any reality you & I could possibly form consensus about, either material, non-material or metaphysical.

Perhaps a short-cut to the truth of the matter, ... I watched several videos yesterday interviewing kids who gave answers similar to:

"Where did you learn about it?"

"I guess I just thought about it."

"You made it up?"

"Uh-Huh"

"So you didn't really learn about it anywhere..."

"Nuh-uh"

~2m44s: <https://youtu.be/wsw8EXuefuY?t=2m43s>

So, it appears to me that the unmooring of shared myths, belief systems and consensual facts pushes us ever further into a downward spiral of absurdity. We're all increasingly trapped in the subjective stories we are telling ourselves. A kind of collective Solipsism ad Absurdum ad Nauseam.

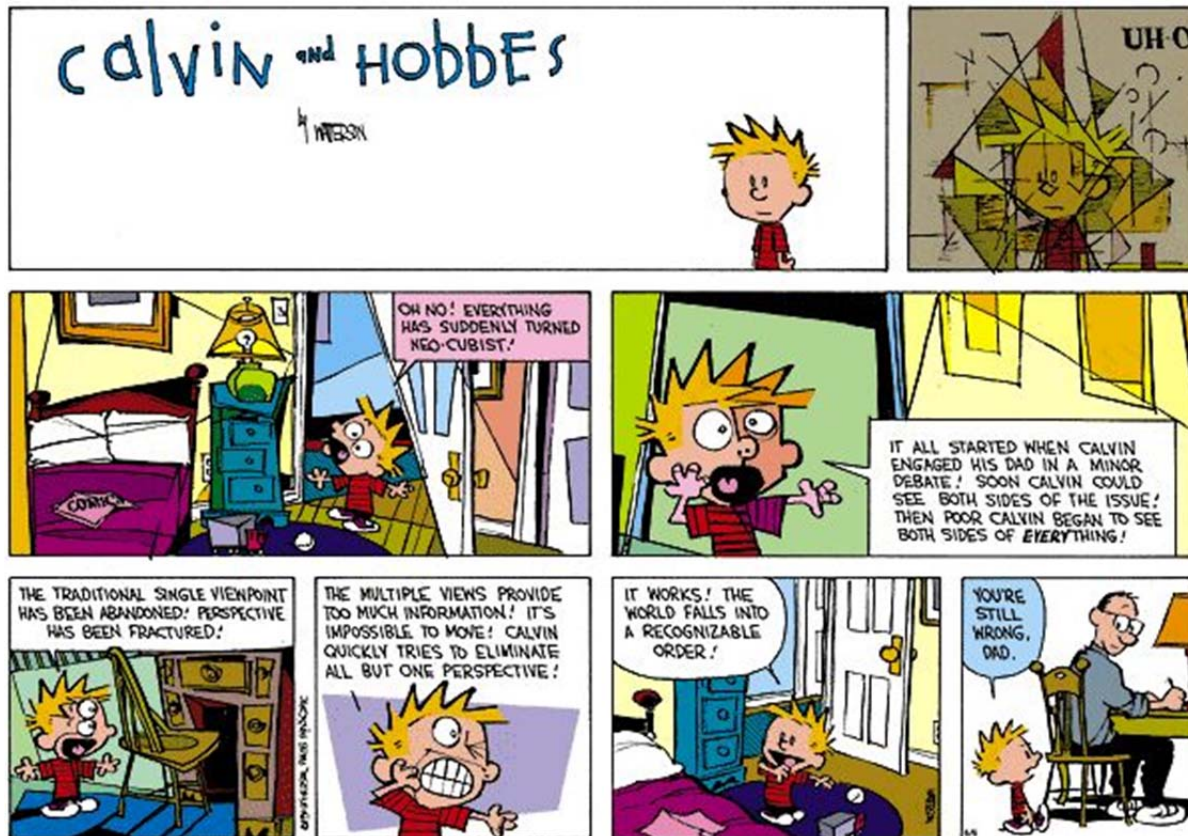
[Arne Wilson](#) I'll start looking them up, Dan. I recall Aaron Copeland joking that "If a critic says two words about music, one of them is wrong." The art work is a form of speech but it doesn't necessarily translate into any speech but its own unique expression. That makes criticism, the making of judgments, indeed linger on the edge of solipsism, and, what to another may be endless absurdity.

[Arne Wilson](#) People want to reduce symbols to emblems, not the experience of a symbol but a sign, title, name or marker for it that's easier to use. What's problematic in a symbol has to be reduced to something pragmatic.

An artwork to command attention has to offer something "problematic" that engrosses attention but, once that's done, we try to resolve it, make it "prosaic" or "banal" again or just "praxis", something we can deal with as pragmatically as we do other things.

We adapt to even the most extraordinary work and feel great relief in doing that. We don't necessarily feel comfortable if we can't do that and we want "comfortable art," something that confirms our preferences. People want non-representative art, something that is meaningful in itself, to have some meaning to them, to be easy to interpret or be a familiar and comfortable representation. The artist has to take charge of that, turn their attention to a kind of experience, their experience to some sort of intuition, and that intuition to some kind of action.

[Dan Landrum](#) Arne, I solidly agree with this reductionist interpretation up to somewhere about the 60s, when technology gave us extended macro and micro views and an overwhelming amounts of Big Data, beyond the human ability to comprehend, much less derive realistic meaning. Art then slipped into novel for novelty sake, weird for weirdness sake. Taboo busting aside, overwhelmed artist we're left merely with a humongous pile of shards of information to cobble together into fanciful cacophonies of mosaic fiction. What's unsettling is that art critics don't see this process for what it is, but bolster their own 'the emperor has no clothes' credibility in adding a new layer of myth, mystery, and fiction to the mess.



[Dan Landrum](#) A couple of decades ago I had a solo show in a prominent downtown San Diego gallery, which was reviewed by one of the area's leading critics. The non-objective work provided no symbols or emblems, and sought to draw the viewer away from the associative mind and towards a direct experience of the thing itself, it's a random marks, it's energetic field.

I titled the show "Double Joy" in reference to the old Chinese (or is it Swedish) adage, 'Sorrow shared is half sorrow, Joy shared is double joy,' as a way to indicate relationships between subjective and shared experiences. The critic that reviewed my show never asked what I was intending in my work. His review consisted of a description of the formal elements of the paintings and a superficial interpretation that they expressed a particular Joie de Vivre, which was not at all what I was going for, nor my experience of the paintings.

[Arne Wilson](#) It was just about the dawn of the "computer era" when I shifted from working with architects to trying my hand at being a social scientist, hence the "reductionistic" view, no doubt. My view of the social was reductionistic in a rather similar way.

And I did have difficulty at times with the "established" authorities. They had rather fixed ideas about the relationship between "art" and "science." Of a consequence they couldn't use notions familiar to the artist in the examination of social events and actions. One distinguished survey researcher had a rather simple Inuit print on his wall. I asked him what he thought it "meant." He admitted he had no idea.

I then pointed out that the scale of each of those items was in direction proportion to a hunter's survival needs, that harpoon coming first and a woman rather in the van. He simply couldn't think visually, couldn't manage to deal with things that didn't come in familiar linguistic terms for all that they were plain as day. That I could was an "odd ability" and, therefore, being "odd," really had no role in social analysis. That I

could interpret what they couldn't and show how something that escaped language affected social behavior was simply dismissed.

Another "...didn't understand..." me. His hobby was photography but photographic perspectives on social interactions simply didn't exist for him. He lived, as others often do, with the various parts of his life sealed off in separate rooms.

[Dan Landrum](#) Yes!, "He lived, as others often do, with the various parts of his life sealed off in separate rooms."

[Dan Landrum](#) "As humans gain more and more powerful, our fictions, our imaginations also become more and more powerful. We are now gaining, really divine, abilities to shape the world. [...] And what will really shape these worlds is our dreams and fantasies, and they are shaped by Art. From this perspective Art is more important than it ever was before. [...] Artist should, more than ever, should be very responsible in what they are doing, I mean if you could shape the dreams of God, this kind of responsibility. "

Yuval Harari with Dan Ariely: Future Think—From Sapiens to Homo Deus
<https://youtu.be/5BqD5klZsQE>
