



# Art and Agency in the Era of De-Structuration: Exploring a New Field

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## Abstract

Human agency, implying, from sociology's perspective, proactive or even transformative individual behaviour upon the social world (or "social structures" as sociologists call them), remains one of the central concepts and problems for both social science and practice. Current stage of societal evolution, de-structuration, makes individual agency especially important for both individual and collective well-being. In this context, the contribution of contemporary art (2018–2022) to agency issues remains little known in the academic world. The objective of this paper is to examine how contemporary art representatives (artists, curators, and experts) express the issue of agency through their artworks, and to compare this viewpoint with the interpretations from other areas of public life. The focus is on those aspects, ideas, and meanings related to agency that are accessible to a broad audience and can be applied to phenomena outside the realm of art but remain overlooked or underdeveloped in current academic discussions on agency. The authors analyse initiatives in both institutional and non-institutional art on a global scale, and explore their manifestations and impact in comprehending and advancing agency. Finally, this article proposes a typology of agency manifestations in contemporary art: (1) straightforward (strong, radical, protest) agency; (2) escapism; (3) panic agency; (4) subject-object carnivalism.

**Keywords** Contemporary art · Agency · De-structuration · Escapism · Subject-object carnivalism · Proactivity

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## Introduction: De-Structuration

The global economic and social uncertainty has introduced a new normal for human existence. Stress and turbulence have become immanent parts of our lives and behaviour – a change that remains overlooked by academic mainstream research (Salvatore et al., 2022). Critics have previously explored the limitations of averaging techniques in social sciences and humanities, which do not provide sufficient understanding of the particularities of individual life – but create, instead, artificial constructs based on statistical instruments ignoring empirical validity of unique personal experience (Valsiner, 2009; Uher, 2015; Mironenko & Sorokin, 2018). This problem becomes increasingly evident with the emergence of a new social reality, manifested, for instance, by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global institutional crisis of 2022. The radical and qualitative nature of changes in the human psyche and social environment requires new theoretical lenses and new approaches to data collection and interpretation (Mironenko & Sorokin 2020). More than a decade ago scholars claimed that we may know less about some aspects of the human psyche in the technologically advanced 21st century than we knew one hundred years before (Valsiner, 2009). Now it is even more evident: diversity of competing ideological images, cultural frames and individual “agentic” strategies has increased tremendously in the last several years – questioning previously unproblematic beliefs concerning core features of human nature, possible modes of individual conduct, and dimensions of societal progress. Sociological literature offered the “de-structuration” concept as a tool for conceptualizing these processes (Sorokin & Froumin, 2020, Sorokin 2023). “De-structuration” implies not only increasing uncertainty and turbulence in social life but also the central role of individual agency for personal well-being and mobility, and also for societal dynamics, including the evolution of institutions and communities (Sorokin, 2020). De-structuration manifests itself in almost every sphere of social life. The most obvious examples come from labour market, education and health-care. Two trends in labour market dynamics are illustrative. First, stagnation or even decrease of traditional corporate employment across both developed and developing countries, with increase of various types of non-traditional employment, including freelance, self-employment, entrepreneurship, etc. (for instance, in developed countries 50% of labour force are expected to be freelancers soon (Blyth et al., 2022). Non-traditional types of employment generally demand significantly higher level of both self-regulation and abilities to cooperate with others, building social networks, finding clients, partners, etc. (one of the reasons is that there is no supervisor or HR-department to help and no corporate insurance as well). Second, corporations also experience intensive de-structuration: in search for efficiency and legitimation, they rise expectations from employees in terms of innovative and, in general, proactive behaviour: various “agile-” and “project-” based formats, “self-organized teams” become dominant form of corporate social organization, while traditional modes of leadership, implying reproduction of efficient routines are substituted by “corporate entrepreneurship” practices and a brand new “hyper-management” paradigm, emphasizing a transformative and missionary style in running business (see more Bromley & Meyer 2021).

In the sphere of education, as empirical studies demonstrate, there are two major changes manifested in the level of policy making and actual practice. On the one hand, learning outcomes, relating to “agency” are being rapidly introduced across the globe on primary, secondary and, most actively, tertiary level (Sorokin & Vyatskaya, 2022). OECD directly names “agency” and “transformative competences” one of the central goals for education systems in the horizon of 2030 (OECD, 2020). The actual learning process also changes, more and more relying on project-based activities and self-regulated learning (Sorokin & Froumin, 2022).

In healthcare we would like to mention only two cases: first, exponential expansion of the so-called “self-help” industry, aimed to substitute several more conventional institutional forms of dealing with various concerns related not only to subjective well-being but to career advancement, medical treatment, etc. The second case is the well-known “anti-vaccination” movement during COVID-19, which demonstrated fragility of such foundational institution as healthcare system (Küçükali et al., 2022).

De-structuration does not mean that “structures” disappear – as some postmodern scholars would expect. It also does not mean that individual agency suddenly has no limits. De-structuration means that principally new structures emerge, empowering and relying on individual agency, while conventional “modern” institutions also change and move in the same direction (in a variety of different ways and trajectories). Individual capacity to act initiatives and creatively, to build new and transform existing institutions, communities, and forms of behaviour – now is a legitimate element of “Human capital” – demanded by the states, corporations, families and other actors, shaping major shift in public debates and state policies (Sorokin & Froumin, 2022). However, what mechanisms and factors lie behind individual agency – remains highly unclear (Cavazzoni et al., 2021).

Human creativity attracts increasing attention in current social theory as, perhaps, the core of individual agency (Hooper, 1998) and, therefore, the main factor in societal transformation (Sorokin, 2020). Somewhat surprisingly, the field of art, as the prime institutionally legitimate generator of novelty and creativity (Bourdieu, 2000), has received little attention in research and debates concerning human agency and its manifestations in recent years. Meanings, ideas and visions that contemporary art generates are important for a more comprehensive understanding of human existence in the era of de-structuration, including such aspects of transformations that remain overlooked by mainstream social sciences and political debates.

This article aims at an empirical analysis of the theme of agency in contemporary art (including its aspects such as creativity, independence or proactivity). It might be especially important in the context of the unprecedented volatility of social and cultural systems in the world when the “classical” methods derived from the naturalistic, deterministic and mechanistic approaches are inefficient in explaining or predicting the dynamics of both the inner world of the individual psyche and the outer social world (Mironenko & Sorokin, 2022). We select and analyse a number of the most illustrative cases in contemporary art, presented in recent years at prestigious art

events in various parts of the world, and propose their typology, reflecting different approaches to and modes of agency manifested by the observed cases<sup>1</sup>.

## Art and Agency: Approaches to Conceptualization

Debates about the relationship between art and agency have a rich history. However, the new reality of de-structuration (Mironenko & Sorokin, 2022) puts the problem of agency in a new way. This makes us reconsider the usual concepts applied to agency in different spheres of social life, including art. Several influential approaches are briefly discussed below.

Actor-Network Theory developed in the 1980–1990 s by M. Callon, B. Latour, and J. Law considers objects (including works of art) as acting units of social relations (Latour, 1987, 2005). Actor-Network Theory assumes that material objects can enter into subject-object relations on an equal status with individuals. The idea that a person does not have a monopoly on the production of meanings in the context of the theory and history of art was developed by A. Gell and R. Layton. In the book “Art and Agency” (Gell, 1998), A. Gell formulated a theory of fine art that focuses on the social context of production. This approach assumes that, in certain contexts, works of art can replace people and thus become independent actors (agents), mediating social activity (Gell, 1998). Gell’s ideas were rethought in the article by R. Layton “Art and Agency: Reassessment” (Layton, 2003). R. Layton is interested in how aesthetic principles are mobilised in the course of social interaction. He writes that works of art are not self-sufficient agents, but secondary ones, reflecting the agency of various social actors. In addition, R. Layton acknowledges that the linguistic model (central for Latour) has significant limitations in explaining how art objects can disseminate the qualities of “agency” (Layton, 2003, p. 461).

Within the framework of aesthetics (Adorno, 1970; Badiou, 2005; Fried, 1998) the concept of “artwork autonomy” is emphasised, implying “liberation from the dominance of the subject”. From this point of view, art is seen as a tool for the practical implementation of agency, providing social participation. The meaning of artworks is considered on a par with the photo-journalistic view of the surrounding reality.

The book “Art’s Agency and Art History” edited by R. Osborne and J. Tanner proposes to apply Gell’s theories to art history (Osborne & Tanner, 2007). The range of examples is wide: Moche pottery, early Egyptian architecture, affective objects in Ancient Mesopotamia, Greek pottery, Roman cult, Christian icons, Ming portraiture, Elizabethan miniatures, Gellograms and art history. The book articulates the relationship between the anthropology of art and key methodological approaches in art theory, sociology, and linguistics. The central problem the authors rise is: what is the distinction between “image” and “personality”? The book criticizes A. Gell for his claims that attributions of agency need to be identified in relation to culture and ideology.

<sup>1</sup> In defining the sample of sources of information and in interpretation of the results we have relied on the expertise of one of the article’s co-authors, Artyom Go, a working artist.

The issue of agency in art is also discussed in the text “Fusions of Powers: Four Models of Agency in the Field of Contemporary Art, Ranked Unapologetically in Order of Preference” by the contemporary art historian, curator and critic T. Zolghadr (Zolghadr, 2013). He identifies four types of agency in art (which have different logical bases) and gives them figurative names: (1) “Indefinite Postponements”, implying that agency in art operates with non-obvious categories and meanings that may never become clear; (2) “Catholicism”, arguing for the direct practical intervention of art in the social sphere, but not including support for radical social change; (3) “Conspirateurs Professionnels”, which is based on the premise that power is inherent in creativity; thus, artists have strategic advantages when they speak with surrounding world by means of their works; (4) “Atheist Choir Boys”, a type of agency representing not a direct transformative action through artwork, but rather questioning the existing social order by the means of fashion or advertising (Zolghadr, 2013).

The book “Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object” (Eck, 2015) combines artistic, art historical, psychological, and anthropological aspects of the theme. The focus is on sculpture between 1700 and 1900. Drawing on classical rhetoric this book develops a theory of the human tendency to endow statues with life.

To sum up, academic discussions in the field of theory of art currently focus, primarily, on the self-expression of artists and their indirect influence on the immediate environment, but without emphasis on their contribution to direct production of new or a transformation of existing structures or institutions (in other words, overlooking those manifestations of “agency” that contemporary social theory considers most promising) (Cavazzoni et al., 2021).

However, there are exceptions. For instance, in the early 1980s, the term “sustainable art” appeared in academic discourse. The term is related to certain types of agentic behaviour that is promoted by contemporary art (for example, environmental activism, human rights movements, etc.) (Fowkes, M. & Fowkes, R., 2007). Sustainable art aims to promote the ideas of a new, more harmonious world order, which includes ecology, social justice, inclusion, etc.

The debate about the relationship between contemporary art and agency with a focus on sustainability started in Europe in the 2000s. In 2006, an international symposium on sustainability was held in Budapest. Practising artists, art historians, philosophers, sociologists, and activists discussed new social realities, like post-Fordism, and possible agentic response by art, including, for instance, eco-art (Fowkes, M. & Fowkes, R., 2007). In 2007, at the University of Leipzig in Lüneburg, the European Association of Art Sociologists claimed that central for art is the task of solving socially significant problems: ecology, discrimination (including gender discrimination), poverty, and social injustice.

In the present paper we take a broader look on issues and fields where artists can demonstrate their agency by means of their works. We focus on the most recent cases in contemporary art, which remain insufficiently studied as a manifestation of individual agency in the context of de-structuration as a new stage of societal evolution. As we have shown above, traditionally, agency in art has been viewed as a phenomenon separated from the subject (the creator, the artist). However, when looking at the contribution by the field of art to understanding agency as an attribute of an

individual, such approaches like the one suggested by actor-network theory, are less relevant. Applying the notion of “agency” to nonhuman actants becomes more and more popular in literature (including debates about art) and may help to better understand many social processes, but in this article, we are rather interested in meaningful human (individual) agency.

The philosopher I. Kant believed that art is creation through freedom (Banham, 2000). Following him, social thinker and art theorist T. Adorno wrote that absolute freedom in art, as one of the private activities, inevitably comes into conflict with the constant state of lack of freedom in society as a whole (Adorno, 1970). Thus, art tries to avoid any fixation, censorship and restriction by any deterministic model. In other words, agency for art sphere is a condition of existence. Through all times (from Classical Antiquity, The Dark Ages, The Middle Ages, and The Renaissance, and further until nowadays), the agential power of art remains visible, contributing not only to development of new visionaries but also to concrete social changes (Davies, 1991). For example, Christian Iconography in the Pagan Rome in the 2th century significantly influenced the economic processes, including trade, commerce, urban planning, architecture, as well as social and cultural life. At the same time, unlike, for example, science or education, art is less institutionalized and controlled by the market and the state – especially since the industrial revolution and the modernization of the 19th —20th centuries. Here lies an important difference between art and other areas of public life, which remain the main focus of attention in research and social policy, related to agency issues (Cavazzoni et al., 2021).

The movement of Moscow conceptualism provides valuable illustration. “The Man Who Flew into Space from His Room” (1982), an iconic work by I. Kabakov, suggests many interpretations, testifying to the difficulties of existence in the world of the late USSR. It is a monument to an unknown hero who did the impossible (taking into account the closed Soviet borders) and realised his agency through mobility.

As argued above, we live in an era of “de-structuration” (Mironenko & Sorokin, 2022). This means that a person faces the need to navigate through a complex and dynamically changing world in which a significant number of factors that need to be taken into account to achieve success or even simple meaningfulness in life, often exceed the power of the intellect. The search for tools that would help an individual sustain and develop his/her own identity, as well as meaningful relations with the surrounding world, continues, which finds manifestation, for instance, in the mentioned above non-stop reforms in the formal education system (aimed at developing various soft-skills and supporting well-being) as well as informal coaching and the therapy industry called “self-help” (Nehring et al., 2016).

The field of art often remains neglected in this context, despite the fact that art is historically expected to generate new tools for understanding reality, including those that are not captured by other major institutions like science or education. The particular relevance of the task to help an individual become more “agentic”, more capable of dealing with de-structured society today, increases in the context of unprecedented social tension and problems of economic development (Sorokin & Froumin, 2020; Mironenko & Sorokin, 2022). Elaboration of new practical tools to support individual resilience and the ability not only to reproduce familiar social practices and relationships, but also to form new ones, on the principles of solidarity, – is essential.

Presumably, the role of the artistic community can be important in responding to this challenge.

## Two Mechanisms of Agency in Art

There are many definitions of “art”, none of which has become generally accepted (see discussions (Rosenberg, 1983; Davies, 1991). In the present article “art” is understood as experiments with new concepts and trends in the visual sphere, following the approach proposed by philosopher Stephen Davies (Davies, 1991). Based on this approach we may look at art as a form of activity, performed by individual actors or their communities. Literature, developing this approach, emphasizes that by creating alternative world of the imagination, artists show possibilities that are absent or hidden within everyday awareness of various publics (Ehrenzweig, 1967). Artworks, as not only products but also manifestations of human activity, indicate artist’s personality, individual attitudes, as well as general cultural themes of the time.

Based on this approach, it is necessary to draw a demarcation line between two blocks of phenomena usually associated with art but having different qualities in terms of agency (Bourdieu, 1987).

The first block implies generation of new creative products that have a utilitarian value in addition to aesthetic qualities. This group implies the “agentic” influence of art on society through the integration of certain creative qualities in utilitarian objects – for instance, in the world of advertising, design, and industry, including multiple cases of collaboration between artists and commercial brands, when the value of artwork is determined primarily by its practical usefulness, usually expressed in the market potential. In this case, the will of the particular client (or the “invisible hand” of market forces) is crucial for the artist, however, often leaving some space for freedom of expression as well.

The focus of this article is on the second block of “agentic” (transformational) effects of artists on the social world, implying initiative from within the field of art, without external direct determinants like the market or the state (Grinberg, 1939).

Contemporary art (including the recent years 2018–2022) usually receives limited attention from both the state and the market. The initiative here has historically been in the hands of grassroots actors. In particular, referring to the example of Russia, one can notice that all the major breakthroughs in this field (in terms of their impact on the social environment) have been made by individual authors or informal artistic associations – from the Lianozovsky Group to Moscow Actionism – usually without any support from official structures.

The aim of this article is to explore the visions and manifestations of agency produced by acknowledged contemporary artists, curators and experts from around the world and to classify the discovered initiatives. We examine how contemporary art representatives express the issue of agency, and compare this viewpoint with the interpretations from other areas of public life. The focus is on those aspects, ideas, and meanings related to agency that are accessible to a broad audience and can be applied to phenomena outside the realm of art, but remain overlooked or underdeveloped in current academic discussions on agency.

## Research Methodology

Methodology of the present research implies combining different sources of information: first, web-sites of the leading contemporary art forums around the world, web-sites of authoritative international art organisations; second, academic literature on contemporary art; third, expert literature on contemporary art.

The largest and most authoritative global forums on contemporary art were analysed: *Documenta 15*, *Venice Biennale*, *Berlin Biennale*, *São Paulo Art Biennale*, *Gwangju and Shanghai forums* (for the status of these events in contemporary art communities – see Kerros 2019). The authors also paid special attention to contemporary Russian art, which may be particularly illustrative in terms of competing visions and manifestations of agency that Russian society and culture have been facing since 2014. In Russia the exhibitions of the finalists of the Innovation Prize and the Kandinsky Prize were analysed, as well as leading exhibitions of contemporary art in the State Tretyakov Gallery, the State Russian Museum, the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, the Pop/off/art gallery (see Andreeva 2021; Afanaseva, 2022a, b; Kovalev, 2021) for the detailed description of the field of contemporary art in Russia). Our analysis covers a broad area, which includes artworks themselves as well as expert and academic discussions around them. In the process of interpretation, we use ideas and analytical instruments from formal analysis, culture-historical approach, social theory of art, the conceptions of psychology and philosophy (Adorno, 1970; Bourdieu, 2000; Groys, 2012 et al.).

For content analysis of academic literature search queries were made in key electronic storage systems for academic sources: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Oxford Art Online, ARTstor Digital Library platforms. Separately, the search for relevant editions was conducted on the web-sites of the Russian State Library, Garage Museum Library, and also on the web-sites of highly-rated journals included in Scopus, WoS, RSCI (Art Bulletin, Art Journal, Art History, Curator, Journal of Cultural Heritage, October, Visual Studies, The Art Newspaper, The Art Newspaper Russia, etc.). Expert literature included primarily articles in periodicals, essays, texts in exhibition catalogues. In addition, the web-sites of authoritative international organisations and global cultural forums were analysed as well as the sites of art organisations, forums, and communities (for example, *Discord*, *E-flux*, *O Fluxo*, *Tired Mass* et al.).

On the first stage, in order to identify relevant sources of information on web-sites and literature data-bases, the automatic search based on keywords was used. In particular, we used the following keywords: contemporary art, autonomy in art, biennale, escapism in art, innovation in art, institutional changes, creativity, locus of control in art, social activism, contemporary art, principles of sustainability, subjectivity in art, sustainable art, and practices in contemporary art. The keywords were selected on the basis of the research team's experience in studying issues of agency in various fields (Sorokin & Froumin, 2020; Sorokin & Zykova, 2021; Mironenko & Sorokin, 2022) and contemporary art (Afanaseva, 2022a, b). The search covered only papers published in 2018 or later.

Manual analysis took place on the next stage: only those materials were selected that considered artistic initiatives aimed at comprehending and developing agency,



that is, such initiatives that directly declare an orientation towards the promotion of certain transformations in the social world or arguing for a certain “agentic” individual stance in relation to the social world. In total, 25 relevant academic sources and 50 sources of expert literature on contemporary art were found. In these sources we found descriptions of 100 cases of contemporary artworks (from different geographical regions of the world, produced in 2018–2022), which we classified on the third stage of analysis, with the help of two conceptual criteria, derived from the sociological theory of de-structuration. The criteria for classification included, first, focus of the creator (artist or curator of artistic event) on evolutionary or revolutionary transformation of the world order, and, second, orientation on intervention into existing structures or on creation of new ones (see Fig. 1).

### Four Types of Agency in Art

Based on the analysed material, we propose the typology of agency in contemporary art. Existing approaches (briefly discussed above), theorise agency or its mobilisation through contemporary art without an empirical base of sufficient completeness or international character. To fill this gap, we rely on the empirical analysis of the

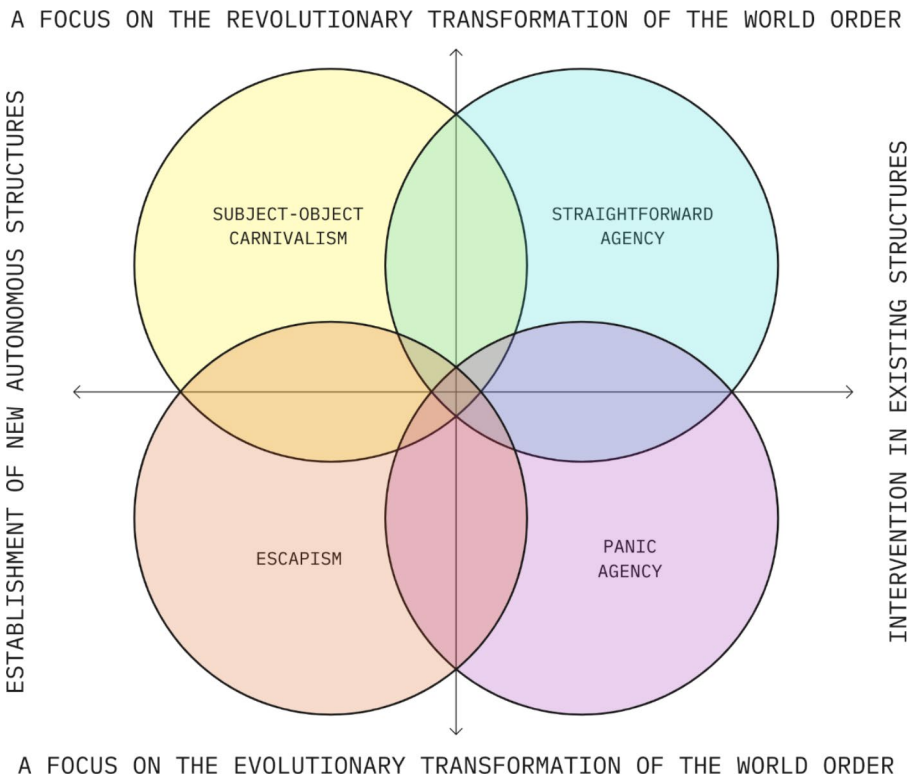


Fig. 1 The agency coordinate system. 2023. The work of the authors of the article

contemporary art field in recent years (since 2018). Four types of agency were outlined based on two criteria described above, including – “straightforward agency” (32 examples), “escapism” (18 examples), “panic agency” (21 examples), “subject-object carnivalism” (29 examples). The most illustrative cases are described in more detail below.

**I. Straightforward agency** is the most vividly manifested individual agency that directly influences social processes, engages in existing structures, triggers discussions for the purpose of social transformation. Across our sample, most often it is protest oriented. This type of agency can help end wars (as one single photograph by Nick Ut in 1972, which actually ended the Vietnam War (Duncan, 2003)), promote new forms of interaction between people, and change the social mood within such major institutions as the state, social class, etc.

A good example is the media project of the Novosibirsk artist A. Loskutov “Without Love Nothing Will Work” (2019), nominated as the “Project of the Year” by the most prestigious Russian state award “Innovation 2020”. The work is based on a stainless-steel plaque from Central Park in New York. On December 8th, 2019, the artist announced an auction for the benefit of the Rusfond Charitable Foundation, which provides assistance to seriously ill children. The starting price of the artwork was 1 ruble. By evening, the work was sold for 1.5 million rubles (approximately 20 000 dollars). Loskutov’s artwork made a tangible contribution to helping children. This project is an example of the strong involvement of artists in a variety of charitable and human rights initiatives.

**II. Escapism** is an autonomous type of agency, characterised by the withdrawal from dominant social structures and the creation of parallel structures, often based on personal networks of relationships. This type of agency implies an intuitive departure from conventional opinions. It became popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. Escapism, at that time (unlike in previous periods), was not perceived as an undesirable form of social behaviour, since the decrease in the amount of personal contacts was seen as an important step to decrease infections and was, therefore legitimate and even encouraged by the media and public opinion, in general.

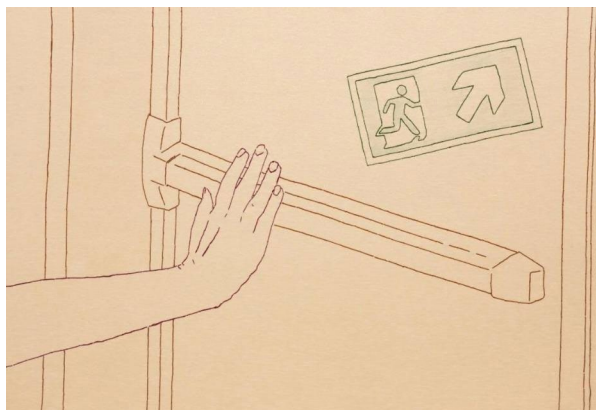
The 12th Taipei Biennale (2020), curated by B. Latour (one of the authors of the Actor–network theory) and M. Guinand, entitled “You and I Don’t Live on the Same Planet”, questioned current geopolitical tensions and the worsening environmental crisis by exploring differences in perception. The Biennale proposed creating a fictional “planetarium” in the museum, in which invited artists, activists and scientists explored the tensions between the gravitational pull of different planets. The planetarium includes a planet for those who are relentlessly modernising despite global risks (“Planet Globalisation”); a planet for those who feel betrayed by globalisation and want to build walls for privacy (“Planet Safety”); a planet for the privileged who want to settle on Mars to avoid the end of the world (“Planet Escape”, the most explicit form of escapism agency); a planet for those who cannot afford expensive travel but seek refuge in an environment imbued with metaphysical beliefs (planet with alternate gravity); and finally, a planet for those who are concerned about the climate situation and trying to find a balance between maintaining prosperity and preserving the boundaries of the planet (“Planet Terrestrial”).

Another example of “escapism” in art is A. Merenkova’s personal exhibition “Escape gallery”, which was held in 2019 at the *Pop/off/art gallery* in the Center for Contemporary Art *Winzavod* (Fig. 2). According to A. Merenkova, the protest in a neoliberal society under capitalism is impossible. Consequently, art may help to escape but not fight the dominant structures. Here we see an escapist gesture, which still encourages the viewer to take action in relation to the surrounding structures – by departing from them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many thinkers to take a fresh look at the social world. Despite the dominant negative view of the pandemic’s impact on society, some artists speak in their works about certain positive effects: an opportunity to comprehend human existence in the novel light of the global health risks and extensive growth of technology, the search for harmony with nature, the uncontrolled growth of fake news, etc. In other words, escapism agency, promoted in a part of contemporary art, encourages the viewer to move into some kind of safe intellectual space by limiting connection to information flows, breaking certain social ties (and sometimes creating new ones). In contemporary social science, increasing tendencies of agentic escapism is generally interpreted as a negative aspect of de-structuration, implying erosion of solidarity (Sorokin & Popova, 2022). However, the analysed artworks show that there are situations when withdrawal from contact with external structures may have positive effects: one becomes less dependent on the structural turbulence of the external world. Thus, through this form of agency, art may contribute positively to individuals’ resilience in relation to social dynamics.

III. **Agency panic** is a type of agency associated with anxiety about the future. It is most visibly expressed in connection with environmental issues. The idea that environmental problems (global warming, pollution, destruction of the ozone layer, etc.) could lead to the end of life on the planet encourages people not only to change individual interaction with the environment but also to initiate certain changes in state policies or corporate strategies. In response to this challenge, artists increase societal awareness by showing the fragility of the world around and trying to change dominant ways of ecology-related behaviour. Such initiatives rarely take the form of direct protest (“Straightforward agency”) but usually aim at promoting emotionally intensive debate or sometimes even panics.

**Fig. 2** A. Merenkova. *Emergency Exit*. 2019. Fabric, embroidery, wax crayons. 85 x 125 cm. Courtesy pop/off/art gallery URL: <http://www.popoffart.com/images/editor/exhibitions/2019/escape/mer13.jpg>



Olafur Eliasson is contemporary Icelandic–Danish artist known for installation art exploring the relevance of environmental and ecological activism. An example is the eco-project *Earth perspectives* (2020) by O. Eliasson (<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/298>), dedicated to climate disasters (Chernobyl, the Great Barrier Reef, the Simien Mountains), which are reminiscent of the impact of human activity on nature. Olafur’s speech at the UN summit in 2019 showed that eco-art can develop individual agency and stimulate emotional and intuitive reactions. Environmental disasters, causing anxiety, shape people’s awareness and personal involvement in global and everyday environmental practices. Unlike “escapism” and “straightforward agency”, “agency panic” is not capable of directly transforming structures, but stimulates an evolutionary adaptation to change.

**IV. Subject-object carnivalism** is a speculative type of agency that implies changing roles when interacting with a work of art. For instance, curators become artists and directly perform artworks according to their sketches (“One for All festival” by E. Sharov), artists abandon their own professional agency and transfer it to local residents (the Pentakosaton exhibition in the gallery “Park”), collectors influence the appearance of the artwork they wanted to acquire using NFT technology. This type of agency creates principally new social structures, communities and practices, breaking the existing practices and conventional beliefs in a radical way – even if on a very small scale.

Perhaps, the most illustrative case is the nominee for the “Innovation-2019” award in the Educational Project nomination, the VMESTE (“Together”) club, curated by E. Ignatushko. It is an inclusive project for people with mental disorders, created to support social integration through participation in contemporary art as co-creators. It is worth noting the intersection of this approach with the so-called “art brut”, the art of marginals and outsiders, identified by J. Dubuffet in 1945 (Musyankova, 2022). Today this trend is often understood as fine art in its purest form. Despite the fact that the works of “art brut” representatives may be found in the collections of leading museums of contemporary art, they are shown mainly at thematic exhibitions, separately from conventional art. The practice of attracting the mentally ill to art production is now regarded as a separate, effective area of therapy (Musyankova, 2022).

Subject-object carnivalism demonstrates an important facet of agency, generally ignored in discussions in the academic literature. It is a type of agency that is associated not with the transformation of subject A from state A1 to state A2, but with a more radical break between subject A1 and a future state B1. Here, artist’s creativity works by making some occurrences pertinent, interconnecting them in a meaningful pattern (Salvatore, 2017). This kind of metamorphosis has not yet been studied enough in other fields beyond art, so this contribution of artists to the more general discussion on agency is especially valuable.

As we can see, contemporary art makes a significant contribution to the practice and conceptualisation of agency in the current world. The obtained results, summarising all the 100 analysed cases can be presented in the form of a diagram as shown in Fig. 1.

## Discussion

Contemporary art rarely generates transformative action in the direct meaning of the word. Most often artists produce images of a world, the perception of which might make people more reflexive and only-through-reflection active in relation to their own life and their social and physical environment.

There are several reasons to be optimistic about the contribution of the field of contemporary art to enhancing the constructive potential of individual agency as a response to de-structuration and the associated challenges related to creating new and supporting existing communities and forms of social interaction. Art is traditionally seen as essentially agentic. Unlike manifestations of agency in other domains of public life, agency, generated by contemporary art, is bound up with individual perception of the world and is imbued with a belief in the indefinable (probably for this reason B. Groys called contemporary art museums “new churches”) (Groys, 2012). Contemporary art avoids the limitations of any deterministic model (this is evidenced by its ability to evade censorship, to move into allegories), and the spirit of this “gentle rebel” is conveyed to its viewer (Zolghadr, 2013). At the same time, the present study shows that the field of agency generated and supported by the contemporary art – is not homogenic or chaotic but may be classified around two core criteria: focus on evolutionary or revolutionary transformation of the world order, and orientation on intervention into existing structures or on creation of new ones.

Important aspect underlying the special relevance of contemporary art for understanding the problem of agency, is the ability of artists to capture the emerging changes and the mood in society intuitively, unlike scientific methods that often require decades to prove hypotheses, collect data, publish works, etc. Through this intuitive approach, contemporary art provides new valuable tools for comprehending societal dynamics and individual psyche in their emergent state.

After R. Osborne, J. Tanner (Osborne & Tanner, 2007) and T. Zolghadr’s research (Zolghadr, 2013) decade ago, the present paper is the first attempt to propose a typology of agency manifestations in contemporary art in academic literature. The specific feature of our approach is that we use sociological theory of de-structuration and related conceptualization of agency (amongst many other interpretations of agency not only in literature on art (briefly described above), but in social theory (see Sorokin 2020, Sorokin 2023)). We refer to various methodological approaches and ideas in academic literature on art (formal analysis, culture-historical approach, social theory of art, the conceptions of psychology and philosophy), however, all of these are re-interpreted in line with the main theoretical argument of this article – that analysis of contemporary art as a special area for agency manifestation and expression allows to reveal such approaches, ideas and concepts that are less visible in other areas of public life – and, thus, such analysis may be integrated in mainstream research and debates in academic and expert literature on agency.

Semiotician Charles Peirce emphasizes that the meaning arises in the process of understanding (Peirce, 1935) – which is especially important for the field of contemporary art often operating with not only novel signs but novel meanings. The interpretant (the sign derived from the meaning) can change depending on who, how and when reads a particular sign. Each spectator can understand things only within

the limits of his or her awareness, abilities, moods. Meanings associated with other cultural codes may remain unclear. Meaning is constructed in the process of interpretation. As a result, there are endless processes of acquiring meanings by certain signs. This approach may be helpful for understanding the mechanisms how agency “works” in art and explaining why the transformative effects of contemporary art on social life may not always lie on the surface but require careful analysis and special methodology, an element of which might be a typology of agency in art.

In contrast to the pragmatic tasks of economics, science, education, etc., the “anti-utilitarianism” of art also makes it unique for understanding agency, which is partly explained by its peripheral position in the public sphere and minimal public funding, which in this case might be a positive factor stimulating freedom and creativity. In most cases, creative activity of artists does not orient on a specific institutional customer and strict formal requirements, which increases opportunity for free agency.

Finally, the field of contemporary art is fundamentally oriented towards the subjective aspects of socio-economic reality, which are the least studied in the mainstream of contemporary social science, usually operating with statistical indicators, but not dealing with subjective categories, such as anxiety, fear, loneliness, anger, etc.

## Conclusion

Our analysis shows that art, sensitively and intuitively capturing the spirit of the time, is able to empower the individual with tools to see the wider possibilities of generating meanings and actions. Art deals with a broad range of phenomena and processes that form the human psyche and directly or indirectly impact individual behaviour and choices but often remain neglected in academic science.

In accordance with cultural-historical theory and a subjective approach (Valsiner, 2014; Özdilek, 2023), it is necessary to acknowledge the profound and qualitative changes in human psyche. The COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread imposition of self-isolation have made it clear that human ways of life and human beings themselves have been fundamentally altered. The following crisis of 2022 questioned widespread beliefs about universal values and modes of conduct on both individual and group levels.

Since the potential of art to manifest and generate agency is poorly understood, the authors of this article believe that further research should shed more light on the mechanisms and effects of art in supporting agentic individual behaviour in response to existing and future challenges.

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