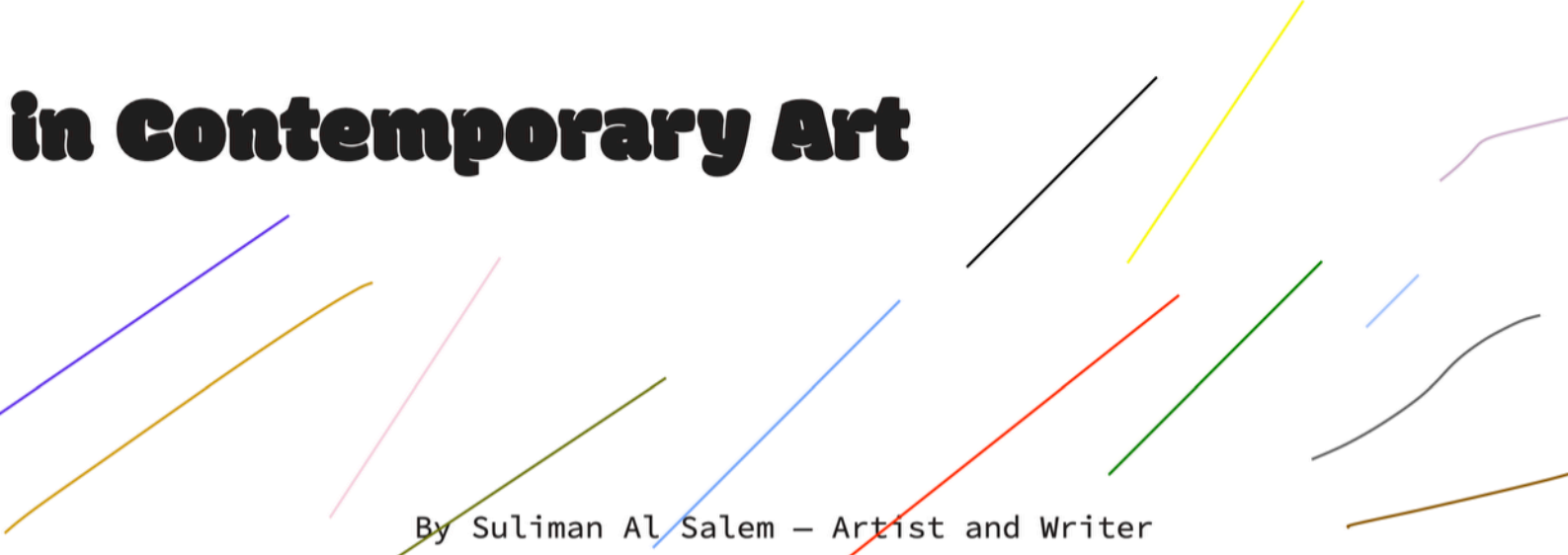




Conceptual Camouflage

Between
Form,
Sensation,
and
the Absence
of Agenda

in Contemporary Art



By Suliman Al Salem – Artist and Writer

Still Frames with Subtitles (after Anish Kapoor)



I have nothing to say as an artist



مهمة الفنان وعمل
الفنان لا علاقة لها بما نعرفه.



Im not interested in what I know, what I know? the job of an artist the job of an artist is not to do with what we know



The artist is like a fool, an idiot going in a journey to discover something



And I think it is the quality of that discovery



Which is the mysterious mythology of an artist, And that what hope I am doing

NOTE :

The research and texts presented are simply a serious attempt to understand the difference between the terms "conceptual" and "contemporary" in the context of artistic practice.

Prologue: On the Crisis of Experience

Contemporary art today stands at a paradoxical threshold: the more it speaks, the less it feels.

In museums and biennales, artworks often arrive already interpreted — accompanied by curatorial statements that instruct the viewer on what to think before one even sees.

The visual has become an extension of the verbal; sensation has been replaced by explanation.

We are living through a crisis of experience — where the act of seeing is continually pre-empted by discourse.

This essay seeks to reclaim art as an event of sensation rather than an instrument of meaning.

It does not advocate a nostalgic return to form, but rather insists that form still matters — that the encounter with material, scale, and perception holds a truth independent of ideology or narrative.

Chapter I – The Conceptual Legacy

The roots of this crisis trace back to the radical shift of the late 1960s, when conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Sol LeWitt declared that the idea itself is the artwork.

In his 1969 essay *Art After Philosophy*, Kosuth famously wrote:

“Conceptual art means that all planning and decisions are made in advance, and execution is a matter of formality.”

This declaration reoriented the ontology of art.

Art became linguistic — an arena for definitions and statements rather than for forms and sensations.

What was once a visual practice turned into a philosophical demonstration.

The power of conceptual art lay in its intellect; its limitation lay in its disembodiment.

By privileging thought over perception, it separated meaning from the sensory encounter.

That separation would later haunt contemporary art — not through imitation but through inheritance.

Chapter II – The Age of Camouflage

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the term contemporary art emerged as a catch-all category.

Temporally, it denotes art made today; discursively, it encompasses works engaged with politics, identity, ecology, gender, and technology.

Yet beneath this plurality lies a recurring logic: many works begin from an external subject — a cause, message, or issue — and then construct form merely as its vehicle.

The logic remains conceptual, even when the aesthetics appear contemporary.

This is what I call conceptual camouflage:

the presentation of a work as contemporary while it operates under the old conceptual regime —

where idea precedes experience and text justifies what vision no longer provides.

Conceptual camouflage flourishes within the institutional economy described by Bourdieu.

It aligns with curatorial discourse, funding agendas, and the moral narratives of cultural policy.

The artist, often unconsciously, becomes a communicator rather than a creator; a spokesperson rather than a maker of perception.

Wittgenstein distinguished between what can be said and what can only be shown.

Conceptual camouflage privileges the former — it says too much.

Authentic contemporary art belongs to the latter — it shows beyond language.

Chapter III – Criteria for Authentic Contemporary Art

If conceptual camouflage represents discourse disguised as experience,
what then defines authentic contemporary art?

From within practice itself, three interwoven criteria emerge:

1. Absence of Agenda
2. Sensation Over Concept
3. Distinctive Approach

1. Absence of Agenda

Authentic art begins not from a mission but from attention.

Meaning arises not as intention but as consequence.

As Adorno reminds us, artistic autonomy is not withdrawal but resistance — the refusal to serve an external function.

To create without agenda is not to reject significance but to allow it to surface organically through presence and necessity.

2. Sensation Over Concept

Merleau-Ponty observed that perception precedes cognition — we sense before we know.

Authentic contemporary art restores this order.

It seeks not to communicate but to affect; not to persuade but to reveal.

It produces awe, stillness, or unease through material, light, scale, or void — not through narrative or symbol.

Such works bypass interpretation and strike directly at the nervous system of perception.

3. Distinctive Approach

Approach is not style; it is an inner method that evolves through sustained experimentation and perceptual rigor.

A true contemporary artist is recognized not by repetition or branding, but by the singularity of a perceptual language that cannot be mistaken for another's.

This distinctiveness emerges from persistence, not posture — from discovering a grammar of making that belongs only to one's own sensibility.

Chapter VI – Four Artists Beyond speech

The following four practices demonstrate how form and sensation can stand on their own, resisting the gravitational pull of discourse and reclaiming art's primary role: to make the invisible visible.

Anish Kapoor — The Black Vortex

In Kapoor's descending vortex, matter becomes absence.

A pool of water turns endlessly into itself, forming a black void that draws both light and attention downward.

The work is pure presence without explanation — a gravitational gesture that evokes fear, wonder, and vertigo.

Kapoor begins not from knowing but from unknowing:

“As an artist, I have nothing to say.”

The piece does not illustrate philosophy; it enacts it — form thinking through sensation.

James Turrell — The Light That Breathes

In Turrell's light spaces, vision becomes the subject of vision itself.

There are no objects to behold — only fields of color that erase boundaries and reorient the viewer within perception.

The work demands stillness; it transforms looking into being.

As Turrell affirms,

“My work is about your seeing, not my seeing.”

Light ceases to illuminate; it is the thing seen.

The experience is neither symbolic nor representational, but ontological — a direct encounter with seeing as existence.

Marina Abramović — The Language of Presence

Abramović's performances strip art of mediation, exposing the body as both medium and site of consciousness.

In works such as *The Artist Is Present*, she does not deliver a message; she delivers herself.

The audience becomes participant; the boundary between viewer and performer dissolves into shared attention.

Abramović resists interpretation, insisting that the truth of art is experiential, not descriptive.

As she states:

“I believe so much in the power of performance — I don't want to convince people. I want them to experience it and come away convinced on their own.”

Her work occupies the space where language ends — an encounter that exists only in real time, in silence, in the mutual vulnerability of presence.

Cai Guo-Qiang — Alchemy of the Unseen

Cai Guo-Qiang's explosions and gunpowder drawings transform destruction into revelation.

Each ignition is both creation and erasure — a choreography between control and chaos.

The artist collaborates with invisible forces: fire, gravity, wind, chance.

As Cai explains,

“My work is like a dialogue between me and unseen powers, like alchemy.”

His practice dissolves authorship; what remains is an event of energy and transformation.

Here, art is not representation but combustion — a visible trace of the invisible dialogue between human intention and natural law.

Epilogue: Toward an Ethics of Sensation

Conceptual camouflage is not a style but a symptom —

a symptom of an age that confuses thought with insight, message with meaning.

Against this confusion, the artist's task becomes ethical as much as aesthetic:

to protect the field of perception from the colonization of language.

To make art without agenda is not to be apolitical, but to resist the politics of over-determination.

To privilege sensation over concept is not to reject thought, but to begin where thought fails.

To insist on a distinctive approach is to affirm the irreducible singularity of experience itself.

In a world where everything is explained before it is felt,

the highest responsibility of art may be to restore the power of feeling —

to remind us not of what the world means, but that it exists

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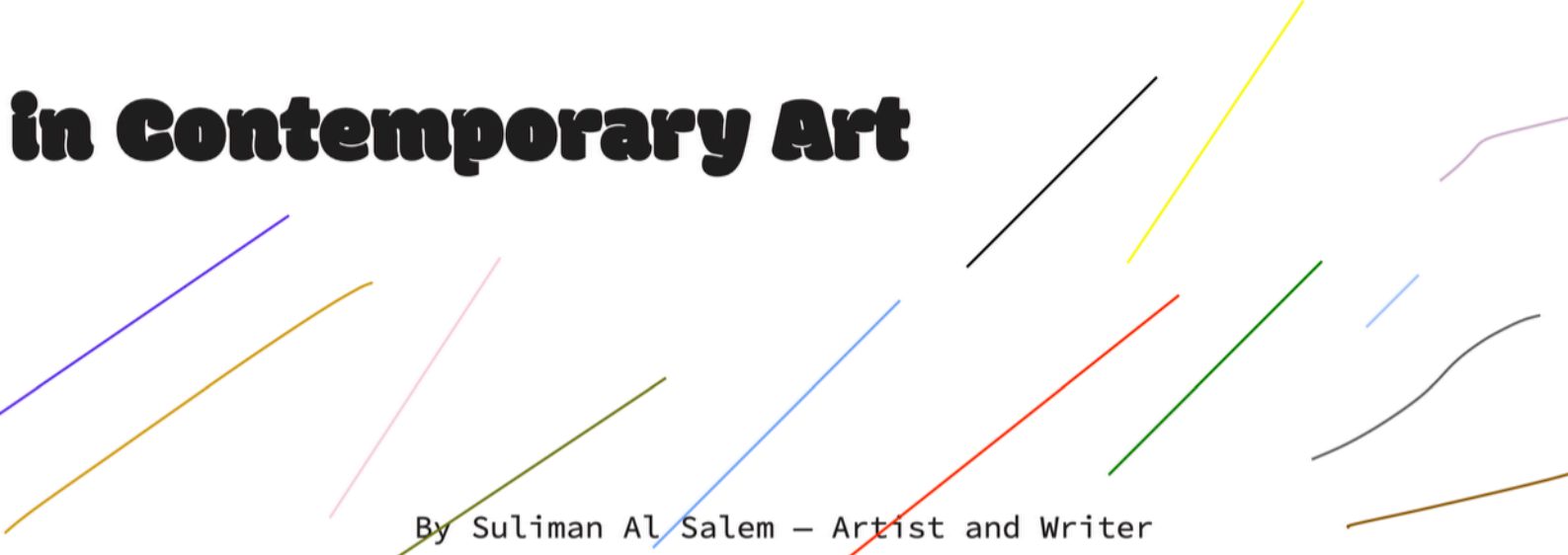
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