

A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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This presentation uses AI tools: script drafted with Claude (Anthropic), face cloned by Heygen and voice by ElevenLabs. The art-historical content and editorial judgement remain my own.



- Welcome to my History of Western Art. I am intrigued by the idea of replacing online lectures with AI generated lectures. I am not talking about classroom teaching which involves interaction and individual instruction. This talk is as far as I have got working with a tiny budget and using free apps where possible. For the first and only time I used Heygen and ElevenLabs to generate a clone of myself for every slide. My clothes and the background are generated by Heygen. I am happy with the experiment, but I will not be repeating it as I find the video of myself distracts from the artwork.

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- If they use information from specific books, websites or articles these are referenced at the beginning of each talk and in the 'References' section of the relevant page. The talks that are inspired by an exhibition may use the booklets and books associated with the exhibition as a source of information.
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60-14 INSTALLATION ART

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Yayoi Kusama,
*Infinity Mirror
Room*, 1965

- This is still the real me talking but the remaining slides except for the summary slide at the end use a face and voice clone.
- This is Section 60 on recent art movements, and this talk is about Installation Art, its history and some key artists. So what is Installation Art?

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Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948)

Merzbau

c. 1923–1937 (destroyed 1943)

Mixed media: wood, plaster, paint, found objects,

electric lighting

393 × 580 × 460 cm

(reconstruction)

Sprengel Museum, Hanover (reconstruction)



Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), Merzbau, c. 1923–1937 (destroyed 1943), Mixed media: wood, plaster, paint, found objects, electric lighting, 393 × 580 × 460 cm (reconstruction), Sprengel Museum, Hanover

- Installation art transforms the gallery itself into artwork. Rather than placing an object in a room, the artist transforms the room into the work. Visitors do not simply look; they enter, move through, and become part of it. The roots of this approach lie in **Kurt Schwitters'** extraordinary **Merzbau** – arguably the first true installation artwork in Western art history.
- Schwitters began transforming his Hanover home in 1923, filling rooms with angular plaster forms, found objects, and hidden grottoes – his "**cathedral of erotic misery.**" The work consumed eight rooms and broke through floors and ceilings. He embedded personal relics inside: a lock of **Hans Richter's** hair, a bra, and reportedly a vial of urine illuminated to resemble liquid gold.
- Schwitters fled the Nazis in 1937 and the work was destroyed by Allied bombing in 1943. He began new Merzbau projects in Norway and England's Lake District, dying in 1948 before completing either. A 1980s reconstruction in the Sprengel Museum gives visitors a pale echo of this lost masterpiece.
- The Merzbau established the template for all installation art that followed: artwork as environment, the dissolution of the boundary between art and life, and the viewer as participant. Every artist in this talk owes a debt to that cluttered house in Hanover.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Merzbau – MERTS-bow

Schwitters – SHVIT-ers

Gesamtkunstwerk – geh-ZAHMT-koonst-vairk

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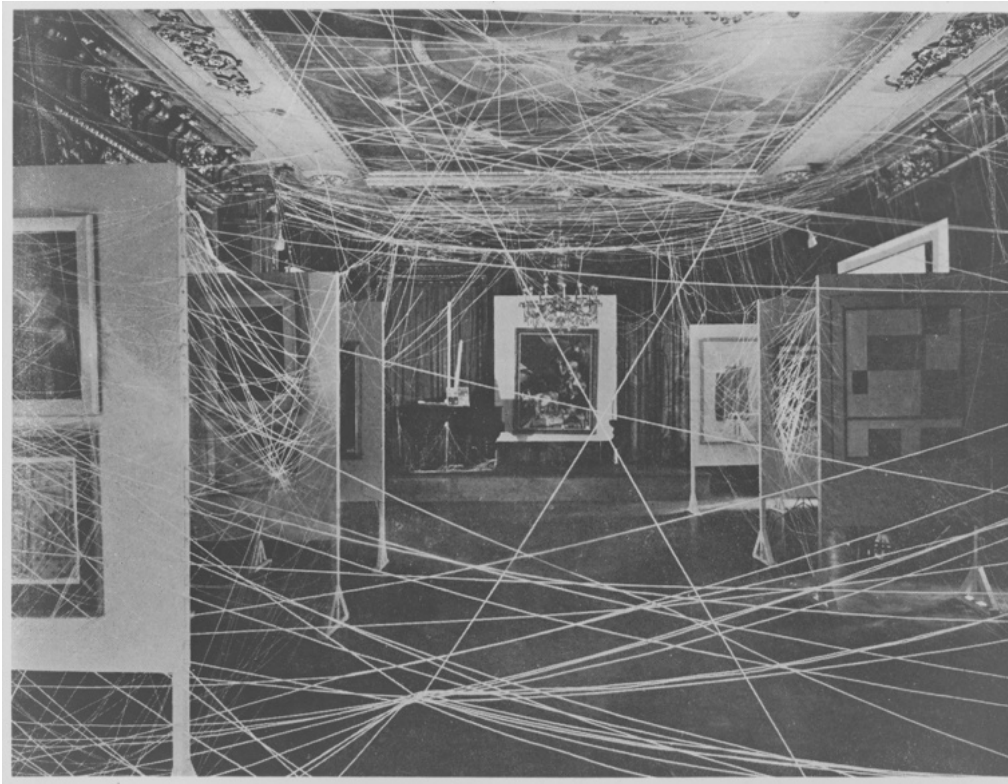
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Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)

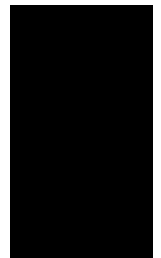
Mile of String

1942

String installation in gallery space

Dimensions variable

First Exhibited: Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York



Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), ***Mile of String***, 1942, String installation in gallery space, Dimensions variable, First Exhibited: Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York

- If Schwitters built the first installation through accumulation, **Marcel Duchamp** created one through obstruction. For the **First Papers of Surrealism** exhibition in New York, Duchamp strung sixteen miles of twine across the gallery, weaving a dense web over paintings by **Miró, Ernst**, and other Surrealists. Visitors had to physically navigate the string to see the art.
- The gesture was deliberately provocative. Duchamp had been asked by **André Breton** to design the layout but chose instead to obscure the paintings. *The New Yorker* called the string "a labyrinth that made viewing nearly impossible." That, of course, was the point. He also hired children to play ball in the gallery on opening night.
- By 1942, Duchamp had largely abandoned traditional art-making, living in New York after fleeing Vichy France. The ***Mile of String*** turned the gallery into an obstacle course, forcing visitors to question how art should be experienced. The work existed only for the duration of the show; no string survives.
- This was a crucial step towards installation art: the idea that the exhibition's spatial arrangement and relationship to the viewer's body could itself be the artwork. Duchamp's readymades had challenged what art could be; the ***Mile of String*** challenged where it could be experienced.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Duchamp – doo-SHOM

Breton – breh-TON

Miró – mee-ROH

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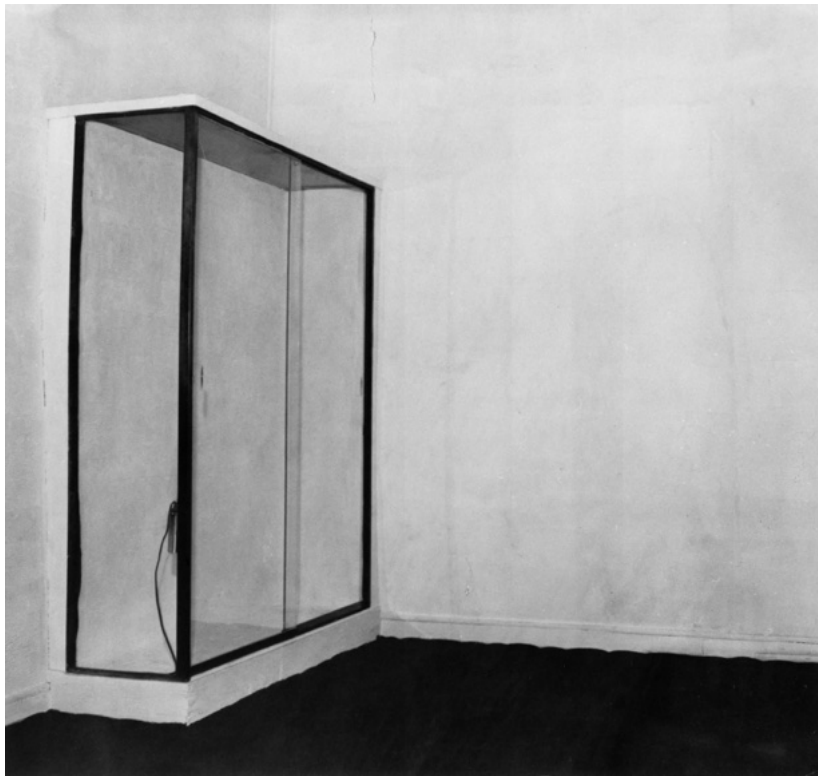
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Yves Klein (1928–1962)

Le Vide (The Void)

1958

Empty gallery space, white paint
531 × 310 × 281 cm (gallery space)
Galerie Iris Clert, Paris (temporary)



Yves Klein (1928–1962), *Le Vide (The Void)*, 1958, Empty gallery space, white paint, 531 × 310 × 281 cm (gallery space), Galerie Iris Clert, Paris

- What happens when you remove everything from a gallery and call nothing the artwork? **Yves Klein** answered that on his thirtieth birthday, 28 April 1958. He emptied the tiny Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, painted every surface white, and declared the void the artwork. Most people skipped the full title and simply called it ***Le Vide***.
- The opening was a masterpiece of spectacle. Klein painted the gallery window his signature International Klein Blue, stationed Republican Guards at the door, and served blue cocktails. Guests reportedly urinated blue the next morning. Three thousand people queued to see an empty room. **Albert Camus** attended and wrote: "With the void, full powers."
- Klein was a judo black belt, a Rosicrucian mystic, and a provocateur who died of a heart attack at thirty-four. Two years later his friend **Arman** responded by filling the same gallery floor-to-ceiling with rubbish in ***Le Plein*** (The Full-Up). Invitations arrived in sardine cans.
- *Le Vide* proved that installation art could work with absence as powerfully as with objects. The space itself – its atmosphere, the viewer's expectations, the ritual of entering – became the medium. Klein had made invisible experience the art.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Le Vide – luh VEED

Yves Klein – EEV KLINE

Galerie Iris Clert – gal-uh-REE ee-REECE CLAIR

Arman – ar-MON

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Allan Kaprow (1927–2006)

Yard

1961

Used car tyres, tar paper

Dimensions variable

The Hepworth, Wakefield



Allan Kaprow (1927–2006), *Yard*, 1961, Used car tyres, tar paper, Dimensions variable, The Hepworth, Wakefield

- Allan Kaprow filled the courtyard of the Martha Jackson Gallery with hundreds of used car tyres. Visitors were invited to walk on them, climb them, throw them around. Five mounds of tar paper concealed sculptures from the gallery's own collection. The piece was called simply **Yard**, and it redefined what an exhibition could be.
- Kaprow had studied with **John Cage** and coined the term "Happening" in 1958 for his live art events. **Yard** occupied the border between Environment and Happening. It looked like a junkyard. Kaprow said: "The conventional spectators became the participants who executed the changes. Art was like the weather."
- In 1961, Kaprow was thirty-four and teaching at Rutgers University. The New York art world buzzed with Pop and Minimalism. Kaprow pushed in a different direction: art as experience, social encounter, and mess. He speculated whether he should simply have taken the audience to a real junkyard.
- Crucially, Kaprow insisted that **Yard** must always change – "reinvention, not re-creation." Each staging adapts to its space and moment, making the work a living score rather than a fixed object. This anticipated decades of participatory and relational art.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Kaprow – KAP-row

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Marcel Broodthaers
(1924–1976),

Pense-Bête,

1964,

Books, paper, plaster,
plastic ball, and wood,
95.5 × 85 × 44 cm,
S.M.A.K., Ghent
(Collection Flemish
Community)



Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976), **Pense-Bête**, 1964, Books, paper, plaster, plastic ball, and wood, 95.5 × 85 × 44 cm, S.M.A.K., Ghent (Collection Flemish Community)

- Pense-Bête is perhaps the defining debut work in post-war European conceptual art. In 1964, the forty-year-old Brussels poet **Marcel Broodthaers** took fifty unsold copies of his final poetry collection and half-embedded them in plaster. Their pages remained visible but permanently unreadable – the death of his literary career and the birth of his life as a visual artist in one gesture.
- He exhibited it in July 1964 at the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels with a card announcing: "I, too, wondered if I could not sell something and succeed in life. I have been good for nothing for a while now. I am forty years old." As a poet, nobody cared about his words. As a sculptor, nobody cared either – but they were willing to pay for the object containing them.
- Broodthaers had lived in poverty for two decades, befriending **René Magritte** in 1945 and absorbing his exploration of the gap between words and images. The sculpture transformed an unsaleable commodity into a marketable one – a paradox that fuelled his brilliant subsequent career, including his fictional **Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles**. He died on his fifty-second birthday.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Marcel Broodthaers — mar-SEL BROOD-tahrs

Pense-Bête — PAHNSS-BET

Galerie Saint-Laurent — gal-ree SAN-lor-AHN

S.M.A.K. — ess-em-ah-KAH (Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst)

Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles — mew-ZAY dar mod-AIRN,
day-part-MAHN dayz EGL

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Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929)
**Infinity Mirror Room –
 Phalli's Field
 (Floor Show)**
 1965
 Stuffed cotton, board, mirrors
 460 × 460 × 250 cm
 Collection of the artist



Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929), **Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field (Floor Show)**, 1965, Stuffed cotton, board, mirrors, 460 × 460 × 250 cm, Collection of the artist

- In November 1965, at the Castellane Gallery on Madison Avenue, **Yayoi Kusama** transformed a room by lining every surface with her signature stuffed phallic forms and surrounding them with mirrors. The reflections created an infinite field of soft sculptures – a claustrophobic, comic, and genuinely disorienting environment. Visitors became part of an infinitely repeating world.
- This was Kusama's breakthrough. She had been hand-sewing thousands of phallic forms for her **Accumulation** sculptures since 1962. The mirror room multiplied a single room's contents into infinity, making obsessive repetition – which Kusama associates with her mental health – literally visible. She called it a form of self-obliteration: losing the self within the pattern.
- Kusama's triumph was shadowed by injustice. The following year, **Lucas Samaras** exhibited a mirrored room at the Pace Gallery and received far greater critical attention. Kusama protested that her idea had been copied. The pattern of women artists being overlooked while male contemporaries received credit recurs throughout twentieth-century art history.
- Since 1977, Kusama has lived voluntarily in a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo, walking each morning to her adjacent studio. Now in her mid-nineties, she is one of the world's most popular living artists. Her **Infinity Mirror Rooms** generate queues hours long at every major museum venue.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Kusama – koo-SAH-mah

Yayoi – YAH-yoy

Phalli – FAL-eye

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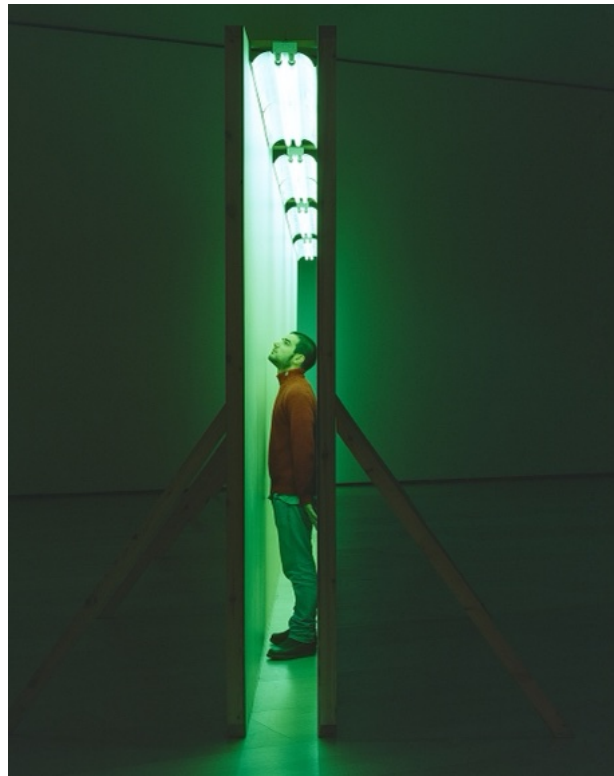
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Bruce Nauman (b. 1941)
Green Light Corridor
 1970
 Wallboard, fluorescent light
 fixtures
 with green lamps
 305 × 31 × 1219 cm (approx.)
 Solomon R. Guggenheim
 Museum, New York



Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), *Green Light Corridor*, 1970, Wallboard, fluorescent light fixtures with green lamps, 305 × 31 × 1219 cm (approx.), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

- Two parallel walls of painted wallboard, twelve metres long, narrowing to a gap of barely thirty centimetres: visitors who enter **Bruce Nauman's Green Light Corridor** must turn sideways and shuffle forward, bathed in a sickly green fluorescent glow. The space is claustrophobic, even hostile. It transforms a neutral gallery into a physical ordeal.
- Nauman began corridor pieces in 1969, building two walls in his studio for a performance piece. He noticed how a camera on a tripod at one end created a disorienting feedback loop on a monitor at the other: to walk towards the camera was to walk away from yourself on screen. The psychological effect of architecture on the body became his central subject.
- In 1970, Nauman was twenty-nine, based in Pasadena, and had just appeared in the landmark exhibition **Information** at MoMA. The corridors joined neon text works, video surveillance pieces, and body-cast sculptures in an investigation of anxiety, control, and the vulnerability of the human body in institutional space.
- Later corridor versions added closed-circuit cameras that showed you not your current position but footage of yourself entering, already past. The delay disorientated visitors profoundly, making the work about surveillance and the impossibility of seeing yourself in real time.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Nauman – NOW-man

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986)

The End of the Twentieth Century

1983–1985

Basalt, clay, felt

90 × 700 × 1200 cm

(displayed)

Tate Modern, London



Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *The End of the Twentieth Century*, 1983–1985, Basalt, clay, felt, 90 × 700 × 1200 cm (displayed), Tate Modern, London

- Thirty-one rough basalt rocks lie scattered across the floor like fallen bodies. Each has a conical plug removed, relined with felt and clay, and replaced – as if the stone has been wounded and dressed. **Joseph Beuys** chose basalt deliberately: a volcanic rock formed by rapid cooling, symbolising civilisation's violent eruptions and the possibility of healing them.
- The installation grew from Beuys's **7000 Oaks** project for Documenta 7 in Kassel (1982), which proposed planting seven thousand oak trees across the city, one basalt stone beside each tree. As the trees grew and the stones receded in proportion, geological and biological time were set against one another. Beuys called it "social sculpture."
- Beuys served as a Luftwaffe radio operator in World War Two. His often-mythologised account of being rescued by Tatars who packed him in fat and felt after a plane crash gave him a private symbolic vocabulary he deployed throughout his career. The fat and felt in ***End of the Twentieth Century*** carry that resonance.
- The work exists in three versions. The Tate's thirty-one stones were the last Beuys personally completed before his death in January 1986. The title offers no optimism: the century ends in rubble, the stones wounded. But the felt and clay insist on repair.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Beuys – BOYSS

Basalt – bah-SALT

Documenta – doh-koo-MEN-tah

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Ilya Kabakov (1933–2023)

The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment

1985

Mixed media installation

140 × 300 × 250 cm

Centre Pompidou, Paris



Ilya Kabakov (1933–2023), ***The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment***, 1985, Mixed media installation, 140 × 300 × 250 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris

- You peer through cracks in a hastily boarded-up wall into a small, devastated room. Soviet propaganda posters paper the walls. A catapult device dominates the centre. The ceiling is open where a body-shaped hole reveals the sky. The absent figure has literally escaped into space, leaving behind their entire Soviet life. **Ilya Kabakov's** conceit is simultaneously absurd and heartbreaking.
- This was Kabakov's first "total installation," created in his Moscow studio in 1985. It belongs to a series of ten rooms about fictional Soviet citizens whose lives have reached breaking point. Each room is an archive of a life: its objects, its notes, its evidence of aspiration crushed under the weight of the system.
- Kabakov was born in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, and spent decades as an officially tolerated children's book illustrator while secretly making conceptual art. He emigrated to New York in 1988, just as the Soviet Union began to dissolve. The work that had been too dangerous to exhibit at home became celebrated globally within years of his departure.
- The power of the work lies in what is absent. You cannot enter the room – only observe through the gap. The viewer is placed in the role of the Soviet state: a watcher who arrives too late. The man has already gone.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Kabakov – kah-bah-KOFF

Ilya – il-YAH

Dnipropetrovsk – dnee-pro-peh-TROVSK

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Barbara Kruger (b. 1945)

Untitled (installation)

1991

Photographic silkscreen on paper,

covering walls, floor, and ceiling

Dimensions variable (site-specific)

Mary Boone Gallery, New York
(first realised)



Barbara Kruger (b. 1945), *Untitled (installation)*, 1991, Photographic silkscreen on paper covering walls, floor, and ceiling, Dimensions variable, Mary Boone Gallery, New York

- Walk into the room and text screams at you from every surface. Walls, floor, ceiling – all covered with **Barbara Kruger's** signature red-and-white Futura Bold Oblique declarations: "Who is beyond the law? Who is bought and sold? Who is free to choose?" The visitor becomes a body inside an argument, surrounded on all sides.
- Kruger trained as a graphic designer at Condé Nast before becoming an artist, and she understands how images and text function as power. She appropriates the visual language of advertising and authority – bold sans-serif, high contrast, the commanding imperative – and turns it back on viewers, forcing them to interrogate who speaks and who is addressed.
- The 1991 installation marked a turning point. Previously Kruger had worked with individual prints and billboards; now the gallery space itself became the medium. There was no neutral ground, no place to stand outside the text. The work anticipated the total-immersion media environment of the twenty-first century by a decade.
- Kruger has since created room-scale installations at MoMA, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the National Portrait Gallery. The questions her texts pose – about power, gender, race, and consumption – feel no less urgent today than in

1991.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Kruger – KROO-ger

Futura – foo-TOO-rah

Condé Nast – kon-DAY NAST

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Cornelia Parker (b. 1956)

Cold Dark Matter:

An Exploded View
1991

Wood, metal, plastic,
ceramic, paper,
textile, wire

400 × 500 × 500 cm

Tate, London



Cornelia Parker (b. 1956), ***Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View***, 1991, Wood, metal, plastic, ceramic, paper, textile, wire, 400 × 500 × 500 cm, Tate, London

- Cornelia Parker filled a garden shed with objects from car boot sales – bicycles, tools, shoes, books – and arranged for the British Army to blow it up. She collected every surviving fragment and suspended them on fine wires around a single bare light bulb, recreating the shed's original dimensions in an exploded view. Every splinter, charred handle, and buckled wheel hung frozen at the moment after detonation.
- Parker had wanted to create an explosion for years, seeing it as "an archetypal image." The Army agreed on condition they could use their own Semtex. The blast was over in a fraction of a second; the aftermath – mapping, suspending, arranging – took months. The work transforms an act of violence into something exquisitely delicate.
- Parker grew up on a Cheshire smallholding with a violent father who repeatedly destroyed her belongings. This biographical layer is not incidental: the work enacts a controlled, beautiful destruction of ordinary objects, and then insists on preserving every piece. Obliteration becomes a form of care.
- The title references the invisible matter physicists believe constitutes most of the universe. The things we cannot see – dark matter, repressed memory, the gap between cause and effect – are the real subject of the work.

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Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967)
The Weather Project
 2003
 Monofrequency lights,
 projection foil,
 haze machines, mirror foil,
 aluminium,
 scaffolding
 2670 × 2230 × 15540 cm
 Turbine Hall, Tate Modern,
 London



Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967), *The Weather Project*, 2003, Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, scaffolding, 2670 × 2230 × 15540 cm, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London

- A vast artificial sun glowed at one end of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Fine mist drifted through the five-storey space. Two thousand square metres of mirror on the ceiling reflected the crowd back at itself. Five million visitors came across sixteen weeks – many lying on the floor, watching themselves from above. **Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project*** became a social phenomenon.
- The sun was a semicircle of approximately two hundred monofrequency lamps behind a projection foil that stripped all colour except yellow. The entire hall became monochrome gold. The mist was generated by ultrasonic humidifiers, making the air itself visible. Every element was technically exposed – there was no pretence of magic, yet the effect was overwhelming.
- Eliasson is Danish-Icelandic, trained at the Royal Danish Academy. He runs Studio Olafur Eliasson in Berlin, a large practice combining architecture, science, and art. His work consistently explores how we perceive our environment and the political implications of that perception.
- The ***Weather Project*** made installation art a mainstream spectacle without sacrificing intellectual depth. It addressed climate change before that was mainstream. The Unilever Series it belonged to became the most successful free public art programme in history.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Olafur Eliasson – OH-lah-fur EL-ee-ah-son

monofrequency – MON-oh-FREE-kwen-see

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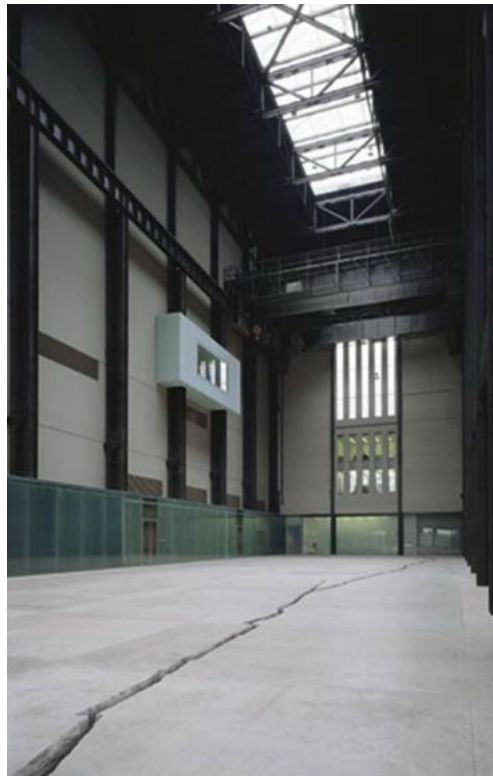
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Doris Salcedo (b. 1958),
Shibboleth,
 2007,
 Concrete and steel,
 167 m long × variable
 width and depth,
 Tate Modern, London
 (Turbine Hall)



Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), ***Shibboleth***, 2007, Concrete and steel, 167 m long × variable width and depth, Tate Modern, London (Turbine Hall)

- Shibboleth was the eighth commission in Tate Modern's Unilever Series for the Turbine Hall. Rather than adding something to the space, **Doris Salcedo** cut into it: a 167-metre crack running the full length of the hall, beginning as a hairline fracture and widening to more than twenty centimetres. The floor appeared literally split.
- The title refers to the biblical episode in which Gileadites identified fleeing Ephraimites by their inability to pronounce the word correctly. A shibboleth is any distinguishing mark that identifies an outsider. Salcedo, born in Bogotá and shaped by Colombia's decades of civil conflict, uses the crack as a metaphor for the social fractures of racism and colonialism – the foundational divisions of Western modernity.
- The work divided critics. Some questioned whether cracking a listed building was justified. The engineering, by Stuart Smith of Arup, required three months of concealed excavation; the illusion of a fractured original floor was achieved through extremely precise cutting and casting.
- When the show closed, the crack was sealed with concrete – but a scar remained. Tate decided to preserve the trace as a permanent part of the floor, making the work's subject – irreparable division – literally true of the building itself.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Shibboleth — SHIB-oh-leth

Doris Salcedo — DOH-ris sal-SEH-doh

Bogotá — boh-goh-TAH

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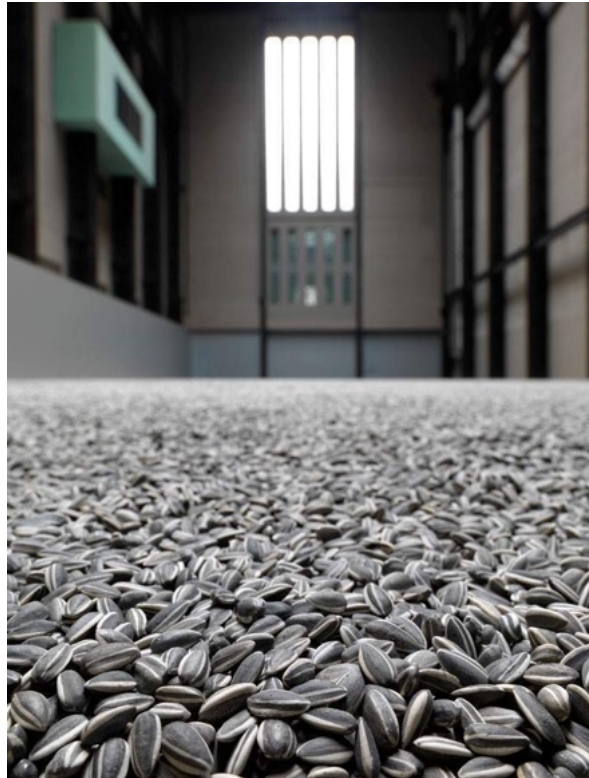
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Ai Weiwei (b. 1957)

Sunflower Seeds

2010

100 million hand-painted porcelain
sunflower seeds

1000 × 1300 cm (approx. floor area)
Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London



Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, 100 million hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds, 1000 × 1300 cm (approx. floor area), Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London

- One hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds – each individually hand-crafted and painted by artisans in Jingdezhen, China's historic porcelain capital – carpeted the entire Turbine Hall floor. Visitors were initially invited to walk across them, feeling them shift underfoot. Health and safety concerns about silica dust closed the floor to walking after the first week; the seeds remained but became landscape.
- Sunflower seeds carry layered meaning in Chinese culture. During the Cultural Revolution, propaganda posters showed citizens as sunflowers turning towards **Mao Zedong** as their sun. Seeds were also the food shared between people during famine. Each seed is identical at first glance; examined closely, every one is unique.
- The installation addresses mass production, labour, individuality within collectivism, and the relationship between China and the West. Sixteen hundred workers in Jingdezhen spent two years making the seeds. **Ai Weiwei** was arrested by Chinese authorities six months after the show opened. The seeds were his final major work before detention.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Ai Weiwei – EYE WAY-way
Jingdezhen – JING-duh-jen
Ai Qing – EYE CHING

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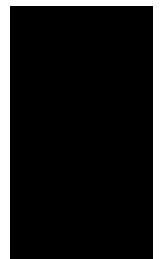
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Kara Walker (b. 1969),
A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,
 2014,
 Polystyrene foam and sugar,
 1080 × 790 × 2300 cm,
 Domino Sugar Refinery,
 Brooklyn, New York
 (destroyed)



Kara Walker (b. 1969), ***A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,*** 2014,
 Polystyrene foam and sugar, 1080 × 790 × 2300 cm, Domino Sugar Refinery,
 Brooklyn, New York (destroyed)

- The full title runs like a battle cry: ***A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World.*** Kara Walker created a monumental sphinx – ten metres tall, coated in white sugar – inside the former Domino Sugar refinery in Brooklyn, surrounded by small molasses-dark figures of Black boys carrying baskets. The space itself was the subject: a derelict site of American industrial slavery.
- Roberta Smith called it "beautiful, brazen and disturbing," describing the figure's face as that of "a knowing, maternal, impassive African queen." Over 130,000 visitors came in seven weeks. Many photographed the attendant figures making sexually suggestive poses – behaviour Walker documented as part of her project, evidence of the unexamined reflexes the work sought to expose.
- Walker, raised in Atlanta from age thirteen, first encountered the imagery of the antebellum South and the plantation tradition while still a teenager. The use of the sphinx invokes African origins and female power, while "subtlety" is a medieval term for a decorative sugar sculpture served at banquets. The work insists these histories are not past.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Kara Walker — KAR-uh WAW-ker

Figa — FEE-gah

Domino — DOM-ih-noh

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Chiharu Shiota (b. 1972)

The Key in the Hand

2015

Old keys, crimson wool,
wooden boats

Dimensions variable (site-
specific)

Japan Pavilion, Venice
Biennale (first realised)



Chiharu Shiota (b. 1972), ***The Key in the Hand***, 2015, Old keys, crimson wool, wooden boats, Dimensions variable (site-specific), Japan Pavilion, Venice Biennale

- A dense canopy of crimson thread stretches across the Japan Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, suspending hundreds of thousands of old keys. They hang like offerings or memories, swaying faintly in the air. Two old wooden boats rest on the floor beneath, as if the keys rain down into them. **Chiharu Shiota's *The Key in the Hand*** asks: what do we carry, and what do we let go?
- Shiota was born in Osaka and studied under **Marina Abramović** in Germany. Her signature medium is thread – black, red, white – strung across rooms and objects to suggest the invisible threads of memory and connection between people. She had been collecting keys from the public for years: each one donated by a stranger, each one the unlocking point of a life now closed.
- The work had a deeply personal urgency. In 2014, Shiota was diagnosed with cancer for the second time, and used the piece to reflect on mortality: what we leave behind, what we hold on to, what we pass on. The crimson threads – the colour of blood and of life – connect every suspended key to every other, making the accumulated experience of strangers into a shared web.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Chiharu Shiota – chee-HAH-roo shee-OH-tah

Abramović – ah-BRAH-mo-vitch

Biennale – bee-en-NAH-leh

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60-14 INSTALLATION ART

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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Chiharu Shiota,
*The Key in the
Hand*,
2015

- I am back again. What did you think of the clone?
- Installation art was born in Schwitters's cluttered Hanover rooms and, has become the dominant form of contemporary art. From Klein's void to Eliasson's artificial sun, from Kaprow's tyres to Shiota's keys, it continues to offer what no painting or sculpture can: the total transformation of space and the immersion of the viewer in the artist's world. It demands physical presence. In an age of screens, it insists that you be there. That remains its radical promise and its enduring power.
- Thank you for your time and attention and goodbye for now.



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