

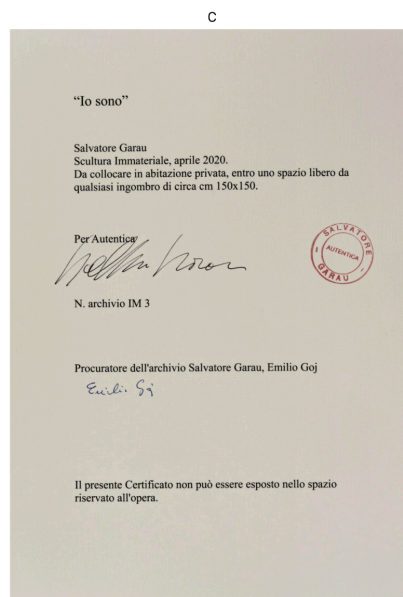
To see or not to see...that is the question

The recent sale of Italian artist Salvatore Garau's 'invisible' sculpture is a potent reminder of 'conceptual art', where the idea takes precedence, and not its physical manifestation.

by Rahul Kumar | Published on : Jun 09, 2021



One fine morning last week I woke up to a barrage of messages and social media posts referencing a news of an artwork sale. A sculpture titled *Io Sono* (translated 'I Am') was sold by artist Salvatore Garau for USD18,000 through the Italian auction house Art-Rite. You may wonder what the big deal is about that? Well, just that the work sold was invisible! The artwork exists only in the imagination of the artist. According to the news, the 67-year-old artist explains in a video, "The vacuum is nothing more than a space full of energy, and even if we empty it and there is nothing left. According to the 'Heisenberg uncertainty principle', that 'nothing' has a weight". He adds, "...therefore, it has energy that is condensed and transformed into particles, that is, into us. You don't see it but it exists; it is made of air and spirit".



Sale certificate from Garau
Image: Courtesy of Art-Rite Auction House

I immediately got reminded of my master's lecture in art history, when Prof. Catherine Caesar at University of Dallas spoke of a work titled *One and Three Chairs*. In this 1965 conceptual work by Joseph Kosuth, he placed a regular wooden chair on the floor, flanked by printed photograph of the same chair, and last in the triptyc was a photostat copy of the dictionary definition of a chair.



One and Three Chairs - Joseph Kosuth (1965), Museum of Modern Art New York

Image: Courtesy of Flickr user Gautier Poupeau

One may, as it was the case then, mock this. But this work becomes an important point of departure on how art practices were understood. **Conceptual art** movement advocated a radically new form – one where the work of art was valued, or its meaning and existence itself was rooted in its concept, rather than in the physical or material properties. This format encouraged an engagement with ideas, and de-linked itself from the traditional aesthetics, and technical and material concerns. It is in this sphere that another form of art flourished – the happening and the **performance**, but we will save that for another time.

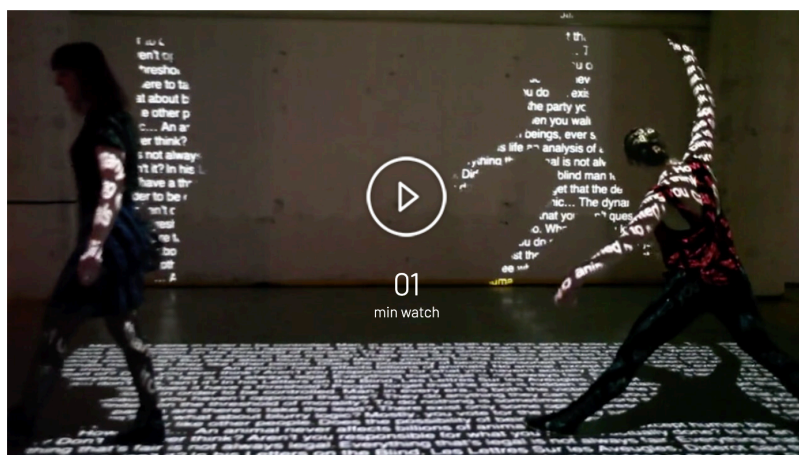
Again, a work of art the way we understand, can decorate, inform and communicate, and often creates an aesthetical experience, one that provides both, an opportunity for the creator to express and cause for the audience to think. The idea of 'non-visible' art itself is not new. But the unusual approach is an attempt to remove all physical manifestations from the idea in its entirety. By providing just the description, the 'image' occurs within the readers' mind.



Levines with Lawrence Weiner's work 2 Metal Balls + 2 Metal Rings (Set Down in the Groove) at Art Basel 2011
Image: Lucy Hogg

More recently, at **Art Basel** 2011, Aaron and Barbara Levine, veteran collectors from **USA** acquired the work of artist Lawrence Weiner. It was nothing more than the words *2 Metal Balls + 2 Metal Rings (Set Down in the Groove)* painted on floor. It was meant to describe Weiner's idea for a **sculpture**. But here is the thing, the collectors did not buy the lettering itself, or a photograph of it, let alone a 3-D model of what it implies. They bought Weiner's immaterial idea, as a certificate, that lets them write his phrase in a room, or have the sculpture made as described. "I think good art is when I can hear the ideas bouncing off each other in my brain. This is where aesthetics is for me...not in my retina," says Aaron at a press conference held at the event.

I have always believed that there are three entities involved in the process of art – the creator (artist), the created (work), and the viewer (audience). If a work is merely an idea, could it still have a 'viewer' to experience it? Evidently it can. If the purpose of art is to express a thought, unravel a question, and if that can successfully be achieved through a non-visible, intangible, but a complete concept of it, then why not?



In Order to Control - interactive installation
Video: Nota Bene

Afterall, we have participatory installations where a work is completed only with interaction of its viewers. Installation of *Nota Bene, In order to control* would be just text beamed on blank floor without its viewers actually creating the form. And Olafur Eliasson's *Your uncertain shadow* will be colourful lights thrown in empty space without people interrupting it to form the 'image'. So, if viewers' active participation is needed for such works to be fully formed, why can't then an artist share the idea of a work and let the viewer imagine it? This feels like it is just further ahead on the spectrum of depending on the viewer to create the work.



Your Uncertain Shadow

Image: Olafur Eliasson, Courtesy of Makeip, Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons

And what's more, actor James Franco announced the launch of 'Museum of Non-visible Art', about a decade ago. The project's Kickstarter page (aimed to raise the required funds to make it a reality) states, "An extravaganza of imagination, a museum that reminds us that we live in two worlds: the physical world of sight and the non-visible world of thought. Composed entirely of ideas, the Museum redefines the concept of what is real. Although the artworks themselves are not visible, the descriptions open our eyes to a parallel world built of images and words. This world is not visible, but it is real, perhaps more real, in many ways, than the world of matter, and it is also for sale".

Analysts, writers, and thinkers began to critically view this 'event' of the sale of an invisible sculpture. Some said NFT (non-fungible token) and cryptocurrency is a trend that cannot be ignored, and others called it a fad, a temporary gimmick that will fade away. Many said it is an adaptation of the folklore, "The Emperor's New Clothes". I confess that I cannot predict the future of this. But for works that are either purely digital, or just ideas without a physical form, NFT is certainly the way forward...to create, to store, to sell, to own, to consume, to authenticate the very work! It may not be the thing for me, but I can appreciate it nevertheless.

But well, traditionalists will continue to value the craft and skill of execution. And so, for now I need to remind myself: *I am a ceramic artist. I have painstakingly trained to handle this unforgiving medium. I enjoy making. It is my need to create.*

I am headed to my studio to laboriously prepare clay, finish some last works before I fire a kiln next week! Sorry, did you say something about non-visible art? What again? I am far too possessive about my authorship to allow anyone to interfere with what I create!