



# Uncanny and Failure —Paradoxical Failure as a Methodology for Conceptual Art

Zhi Han

Lancaster Institute for Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

## Abstract

This research aims to explore a paradigm of conceptual art practice grounded in paradox and to examine how artworks can present the 'real' within this framework. The paper addresses two key issues: first, it investigates the ontological question of how viewers experience the 'real' as revealed through art, focusing on the uncanny sensation and analyzing this phenomenon through a psychoanalytic theory, particularly Lacan's concept of the Real and its paradoxical nature. Second, it focuses on the methodological challenge of constructing a research paradigm that generates the uncanny experience while preserving the paradoxical essence of conceptual art, drawing on a Hegelian dialectical approach, with 'failure' as a central theme. This paper primarily employs Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and Žižek's interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic to explore, from both ontological and methodological perspectives, how paradoxical conceptual artworks, by maintaining the uncanny within them, can present the 'real'—revealing the emptiness of symbolic structures and, simultaneously, the subjective gesture inherent in this emptiness.

**Keywords:** the Uncanny, the Real, psychoanalysis, conceptual art, paradox, dialectic, failure

## 1. Introduction

In this study, the discussion of paradox in conceptual art will focus primarily on a critical cognitive phenomenon: the uncanny, which can be understood as a failed cognitive process. The study's definition of the uncanny is drawn largely from Freud's analysis of the original semantics of the German word *heimlich* (Freud, 1976), which embodies a paradoxical blend of 'familiar and relevant' with 'unfamiliar and hidden from sight.' This contradictory unity is translated into English as 'uncanny.' The exploration of this incongruous contradiction has persisted from early human history to the present day, even as science now dominates contemporary discourse. As early as 1836, Friedrich Schelling addressed this phenomenon in his *Philosophie der Mythologie*. Using Homer's poetry as an example, Schelling described *heimlich* as a force to be overcome—a Greek victory over past principles represented by the Oriental system, which retreated into secrecy through repression (Schelling, 1966, p. 649). Based on this discussion, Freud highlighted the inherent ambiguity of *heimlich* (Freud, 1976, p. 187), which can signify both a sense of belonging, familiarity, and comfort, as well as something hidden, unseen, or secret. Thus, *unheimlich* is not only the antonym of *heimlich*

(familiar) but also intertwined with its meaning—a strangeness and discomfort arising from the sudden revelation of something concealed beneath a seemingly familiar appearance. This duality reveals a fundamental characteristic of heimlich: the paradox at the heart of the uncanny. And more importantly, this paradox is not embodied in the object itself but in the subject's perception of it. The strangeness of the uncanny does not come from difficulty in classifying the object as familiar or unfamiliar, alive or dead. Rather, it stems from a cognitive dissonance within the subject's judgement, as the object is perceived simultaneously as both familiar and unfamiliar, neither fully alive nor fully dead. The uncanny represents a failure of cognition—an unsettling moment of uncertainty in assessing an indeterminate object. It is not that the subject is unsure of which category the object belongs to, but rather that the object appears to belong to both, or to neither. This cognitive paradox does not indicate a failure to understand the object itself but instead reveals a deeper issue within the subject's cognitive mechanism. Thus, the failure that Uncanny revealed reflects not just a flaw in the act of knowing, but a structural problem in the subject's ability to know. This issue, Freud asserts, is not contingent on the object, but is rooted in our belief system (Freud, 1976, p. 210).

In this regard Heidegger, in discussing angst, which is similar to uncanny, also shifts it from the object's position to the position within the subject. He argues that unfamiliarity (not being at home) is a more fundamental human experience than familiarity (being at home), which underpins everyday life. According to Heidegger, the source of the uncanny arises within the subject as an essential feature of human existence (Heidegger, 2000, p. 156; 1962, p. 189). When familiar surroundings no longer evoke a sense of home but instead transform into something strangely unfamiliar, it does not signify a change in the external entity or in the subject's conceptual understanding of it. Rather, it reflects a deeper failure of the subject's ability to integrate these surroundings into their symbolic order. This failure of the intra-subjective perspective is at the heart of the uncanny as a judgment. Similarly, Ernst Jentsch associates the uncanny with a lack of orientation or psychological uncertainty (Ernst Jentsch, 1996, p. 7-16). This refers to a cognitive failure, where one's judgement of the perceived entity fails to enter the established conceptual domain. In addition, the notion of the uncanny has also evolved through the concept of the uncanny valley, introduced by Masahiro Mori in 1970, it refers to an event or an individual's psychological experience that is not only mysterious but frightening in a strangely familiar way. Mori, a professor of robotics at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, observed that when a humanoid robot approaches but falls short of achieving a realistic human appearance, it triggers a shift in human reaction—from empathy to discomfort (M. Mori, 1970, p. 33-35). The uncanny also finds expression in the realm of art, notably in the 2004 Uncanny exhibition curated by Mike Kelley in collaboration with Tate Liverpool. The exhibition featured numerous colorful figurative sculptures, such as Robert Gober's *Untitled Leg* (fig. 1), which explored the conditions and experiences that give rise to the uncanny. Kelley's work drew on Freud's concept of 'compulsive repetition' to create unsettling sculptures and photographs, highlighting the eerie tension between life and death. Through these works, Kelley sought to make viewers acutely aware of the repression of familiarity and the resulting experience of the uncanny (Mike Kelley, 2004, pp.1-2).



Figure 1. Robert Gober *Untitled Leg*

In the example above, the anthropomorphic appearance of the robot both aligns with and fails to meet people's expectations. On one hand, the robot's appearance evokes a human-like expectation, but on the other hand, it fails to satisfy that expectation fully. The issue is not the difficulty of categorizing the robot as either a 'person' or a 'machine' within the conceptual sphere; rather, it stems from uncertainty about whether such categorization should even be applied. If the former dilemma concerns 'corpses,' i.e., either life or death, the latter concerns 'ghosts,' i.e., both life and death, or neither. This ambiguity, described by Derrida as 'ghosting,' does not affect the judgment of the object itself but rather the act of judgment. That is Derrida mentioned ghosts and hauntings thus evoke the structure of the uncanny (Derrida, 1994). This ambiguity is also present in artworks like *Untitled Leg*, where a single leg protrudes from a wall, simultaneously uniting the contradictions of 'someone being behind the wall' and 'the illusion that someone is hiding behind the wall.' What unsettles the viewer is not the question of whether someone is actually behind the wall but the conflict between rational judgment (the object as an entity) and perceptual experience (the object as a hidden presence waiting to be revealed). This tension doesn't blur the subject's judgment of the object but rather the subject's trust in their own judgment. When the fake leg, the anthropomorphic appearance of the robot, escapes the initial misperception of the viewer ( a person hiding behind the wall, the robot is alive) and reveals itself to be a mere representation of an inert entity rather than anything else, the misperceived content achieves a paradoxical coexistence with its true essence. It is precisely for this reason that the uncanny is so troubling. Therefore, in this context, the uncanny serves as a foundation for exploring paradox in conceptual art, highlighting how it is an omen of exposing the deceptiveness of familiar representations and the failure of the paradoxical coexistence between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The omen functions as a traumatizing and destructive sign. If the initial deceptive appearance of the artwork suggests 'something hiding behind the wall, with a leg exposed,' the omen reveals, through the work's honest presentation, that nothing is actually hidden behind it. The trauma lies in the revelation of a fundamental contradiction within the viewing subject's own self, which is typically concealed by 'familiarity.' This contradiction exists between the internal perspective of empirical intuition and the external perspective of logical indirection (Thomas Nagel, 2012, p. 13), or what Hegel refers to as the tension between the sensuous and the perceived (Hegel, 2018, p. 54, p. 71). The omen represents a possibility emerging from the subject's own skeptical tendencies. As Cavell interprets the uncanny, he notes that "reveals the everyday that we have lost," much like how 'being sick' brings 'health' into awareness (Cavell, 2002, p. 247). A parallel can be drawn between everyday life, health, fake legs in art, and anthropomorphic robots: they all initially evoke the most immediate, internal, sensuous

experience of humanity's primordial 'intimacy' with the world. However, Cavell's skeptical perspective suggests that this intimacy is always questioned by the skeptical impulse inherent in human nature, which causes people to doubt the adequacy of the ordinary experience. Katherine Withy observes that this impulse is tied to a 'transitional inflated ideal,' which inevitably clashes with direct experience (Withy, 2015, p. 43). This inflated ideal—such as perception, awareness, or the perceived experience—represents the subject's external perspective. Unlike the internal perspective of direct experience, this external viewpoint attempts to grasp the object's structure and mode of operation. The skeptical impulse arises from the dissonance between the inflated ideal of perception and the more primitive, sensuous experience. This dissonance, manifesting as uncanniness, points to an inherent contradiction in the structure of human perception. Heidegger touches upon this when he suggests that uncanniness is a fundamental feature of human essence, rooted in the skeptical impulse that reveals uncanniness as central to human nature (Withy, 2015, p. 43). Thus, uncanniness as an omen emerges from the possibility of difference: it stems from this scepticism that opens up the possibility of a failed match between the grasp that the inflated reason anticipates of the object and the primordial direct experience of the corresponding entity.

In summary, as a revelatory omen, the uncanny phenomenon suggests the possibility of cognitive dissonance and failure from the subject's perspective. This dissonance, stemming from the paradox inherent in the process of perception, is the fundamental driving force behind the creation of conceptual art in this study. The paradox within the work carries the potential to reveal the 'real' of the piece. Next, I will first discuss the two driving forces and effects of the uncanny, 'real' and displacement, from a psychoanalytic perspective, and explore the methodology of conceptual art creation aimed at this, i.e., the triad as failure.

## **2. Representation or Presentation - The Essence of 'Real' in Artwork**

For works driven by the uncanny's ability to reveal, this paper focuses on how 'failure' as a practice method enables artworks to present the uncanny as a revealing omen of the 'real.' However, before delving into the discourse, it is essential to clarify the precise meaning of 'failure' in this context. I believe two misconceptions about failure must be avoided. The first is the notion of failure as a static concept—a cause or result that leads to the objectification of the sublime in the work, where the representation of the artwork becomes a substitute for the 'real.' This static understanding is inherently contradictory because it lacks self-referentiality. If the goal of the work becomes to present failure as a representation, the content of 'representation symbolising failure' then exists merely as an object within the work. But this purpose is itself resisted by the negativity of the nature of 'failure.' If failure is conceived as an object within the work, how can we claim that something purely negative can be expressed and fixed as a positive, successful existence? How can a successfully expressed failure still be considered a failure? After all, the term 'failed existence' undermines itself through its inherent negativity. The relegation of failure from a pure negation to a mere negative object of reproduction echoes Plato's critique of painting as an art form that creates illusions of objects (Lacan, 2004, p. 112). Clearly, the goal of artwork is not to replace one illusion with another, as provided by the symbolic order. Rather, it aims to engage in a competition with Plato's notion of ideal forms. In Lacan's terms, the illusion created by painting pretends to be something other than itself (Lacan, 2004, p. 112). An example of this can be seen in Lacan's discussion of the paintings by Zeuxis and Parrhasios (Lacan, 2004, p. 112; Žižek, 2008, p. 254). In a competition between the two artists, Zeuxis painted grapes so lifelike that birds tried to eat them. However, Parrhasios won by painting a veil so realistic that Zeuxis, upon seeing it, asks, "Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it" (Žižek, 2008, p. 254). In this example, Zeuxis' grapes represent the substitution of the artwork's own representation for reality, while Parrhasios' veil

reveals the idea behind the representation by pretending to be a representation. It is through the act of 'failed realization' that this concealed idea comes to light. This leads to the error of the first misconception: viewing failure as a static opposition to success. In this static opposition, failure is merely concerned with the pretense of appearance. In contrast, 'failure' should be understood as the act of 'pretending to disguise an appearance,' which is then recognised by the viewer, thereby 'successfully' revealing the true nature of the pretense.

Secondly, it is important to note that our 'successful perception' of the emptiness behind the work's illusion cannot simply be opposed to its 'failure'—the negation of a successful perception. Similarly, the successful presentation of the work's appearance does not imply that it directly opposes failure. In this case, 'successful presentation' is not the counterpart to 'failed presentation' but rather the outcome of sublation of the failure we initially perceive, which does not align with our expectations. Thus, the 'successful presentation of the work's appearance as real' is a central expression of the dialectical process of failure, and the 'successful presentation' is not in conflict with the 'failure of the work's intention.' In other words, the subject's realization that 'the symbolic veil of the work is constituted by the absence behind it' is itself a 'failure' of expression. Yet through this failure, the representation sheds its veil of 'familiarity,' allowing the viewer to glimpse the 'real' that has been substituted. This occurs as the viewer tears the substitutive and deceptive nature of the representation, which is constructed from signifiers. In other words, the experience of failure exposes a dislocation between appearance and reality. It is also crucial to emphasise that this dislocation caused by failure is not simply a gap between the signifier and the signified. Rather, it is between the signifier and the absence of the signified. According to Lacan, the signified is not the concept or object to which the signifier refers but the meaning produced through the relationship between signifiers. The object referred to, or its trace, is erased before the signifier is established (Lacan, 1993, p. 32). In the context of artworks, failure does not reveal a dislocation between the artwork's representation and the object it expresses but instead uncovers a dislocation between the representation, built upon the erasure of the represented object, and the absence (or erasure) that fuels the representation itself.

In Lacan's view, the signifier is typically based on the erasure of its referent (Lacan, 2019, p. 71). The appearance of the signifier does not rely on the existence of its corresponding referent, but rather on the disappearance of that referent. In other words, it is not the presence of something that drives the generation of the signifier but rather the absence of something that acts as the primordial impetus, compelling the constant creation of signifiers to cover up this lack. This demonstrates the essential substitutability and falsity of the signified, which is constituted by multiple signifiers, as well as the representations formed by these signifiers. It is similar to a chess game, where it does not matter what is used as a piece—what matters are the rules governing the relationships between the pieces as signifiers. Likewise, in art, what is significant is not whether the representation in a painting is an exact replica of the real model but how the relationships between the elements of the representation form a concept or narrative. The Uncanny, through its failure to reveal the 'real,' instead exposes the absence that has once again been concealed. For instance, in Robert Gober's untitled leg sculpture, the leg against the wall serves as a signifier for a 'person hiding behind the wall,' but at the same time, its nature as an artwork makes the viewer realise that the leg is merely a piece of art, and there is no one behind the wall. It is this simultaneous awareness of two contradictory realities that gives birth to the 'failure of recognition'—the Uncanny. In this paradoxical coexistence of the 'failure' to know, the false and empty substitutive nature of the signifier is revealed, ironically stating that 'there is no meaning behind the work, only a lack.' The work's 'real' is not rooted in any tangible reality, but in emptiness. However, in the process of searching for this emptiness, the viewer may recognise that there is not truly 'nothing' behind such works, but rather a mirror

reflecting their own subjectivity in the act of searching. This recognition of emptiness becomes a form of success—a sublation of the initial failure to understand.

Both of these instances of misrecognition point to a common feature of 'failure': the paradoxical nature of 'failed cognition.' Indeed, this paradoxicality lies at the core of the study's dialectical approach and forms the essence of 'failure.' The act of concealing deceives the viewer by presenting reality as a representation, i.e., as the representation of the object the artwork pretends to be showing. Unlike artworks that offer an illusionary substitute for symbolic order—deceiving the viewer into believing the representation is reality (such as Zeuxis's grapes)—paradoxical artworks deceive by making reality appear as a representation. The paradoxical artworks deceive the viewer by pretending reality to be a representation, that is the fact that 'the work conceals what may be hidden behind it by constructing a representation' is regarded as a representation that deceives the viewer into believing that he has been deceived by the proposition that 'the work hides its essence'. This kind of work allows the viewer to expose the 'hidden essence' that is hypothetically claimed to exist behind the work, and in doing so, disguises the fact that the 'concealed essence' is the fact that there is no essence hidden behind the appearance, as in the case of Robert Gober's leg. On one hand, this suggests that the appearance itself is the essence, as the supposed hidden essence is nothing more than the deceptive nature of the appearance itself. On the other hand, the act of the viewer exposing this appearance becomes the essence behind it. Therefore, we can tentatively conclude that the essence of the paradoxical artwork is not a reproduction of the 'real,' but rather the 'real' that emerges from the viewer's perspective through the dislocation caused by failure. This self-revealed 'real' represents the paradoxical position imply by the uncanny as a failed omen. In the following section, I will explore this position from a psychoanalytic perspective, examining how the Real—an essential domain in Lacan's theory—centers around *das Ding* and serves as the foundation for this paradoxicality.

### **3. The Real and the 'Real' Hidden in the Artwork**

As previously mentioned, paradoxical artwork employs failure to maintain an uncanny feeling and to make the work a representation of the idea (the driving representation or signifier-generated lack). In paradoxical conceptual art, the core element and fundamental driving force is the concept of lack, which plays a purely negative role in the process of recognition and is represented as an empty place within the signifier's structure (Žižek, 2008, p. 77). According to Lacan's theory, this empty place, along with the *das Ding*—the element that resists signification—together constitute what Lacan refers to as the Real. This is the realm of 'real' existence, obscured by the aforementioned artwork. In the following section, I will use Lacan's three definitions of the Real (Žižek, 2008, p. 191) to explain why the Real in this artwork is presented in the form of a lack:

Firstly, the Real serves as the starting point, foundation, and root of the signifying process. As previously mentioned, the subject's construction of representation through the signifier is based on the erasure of its referents and traces in the act of signification. The symbolic representation of the artwork diminishes the richness of the original experience by objectifying and signifying the work from the perspective of the viewing subject. However, this process of symbolization introduces a paradox: the purpose of symbolisation is to replace and compensate for the absence of the object, which is its fundamental driving force. But at the same time it is precisely the process of symbolisation that creates this absence by erasing the traces of the original, which is its result. This leads to a problem of self-referentiality, where the result of signification retrospectively constructs its own cause. This aligns with Lacan's paradoxical theory of desire, in which desire creates its own object-causes retrospectively (Žižek, 2008, p. 180). Because the

subject's signifying process is driven by an attempt to reclaim the richness of the object that has been symbolically diminished, the remnants of the object's resistance to signification become the fundamental coordinates of meaning. Thus, within the subject's signifying operation, the object-cause, i.e., the absence created by the subject to exert meaning—represents the surplus that escapes the signifying process (Žižek, 2008, p. 191). This surplus is central to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and is the most crucial component of the Real.

As Lacan summarises in Seminar XI, the Real is 'impossible' (Lacan, 2004, p. 167) because it cannot be imagined, integrated into the symbolic order, or directly accessed. Yet, this impossibility drives the signifying process to create symbolic references in an attempt to conceal it. From this, we can understand that the Real is generated by the incompleteness of the signifying operation in the subject's cognitive process, and it thereby drives the formation of the symbolic order. In an artwork, the empty place (the Real) behind the work is established by the illusion of the artwork (the symbolic order) while simultaneously ensuring the ongoing function of this illusion.

Secondly, the Real is also defined as the richness of inert presence and positivity (Žižek, 2008, p. 191). Žižek emphasises that the Real itself is not a lack; rather, the lack is introduced through signification—the gap that becomes evident when the subject encounters failure in the process of signification. Before the symbolic operation of the subject begins, the uncomprehended entity leaves a trace, richness with empirical presence. However, when one attempts to incorporate this trace into the signifying structure of language and thought, replacing the original trace through symbolic erasure, a distance is created between the traces and the symbols. This distance produced by the subject's own actions, becomes an enduring and stubborn surplus. For the contemplation of it is based on the utility it exerts, i.e. the symbol exerts its utility by erasing the real, but the contemplation of this erasure must in turn be carried out with the help of the symbol. This distance between the object and the sign that cannot be erased due to the erasure of the subject is the residue that drives the operation of signification, the *das Ding* mentioned earlier. Thus, by being excluded from the symbolic order, it becomes the fundamental coordinate of the symbolic order. This surplus can only be left behind in the process of understanding as the embodiment of lack. On the other hand, the Real, in addition to existing as a lack due to the subject's erasure, also possesses an undeniable positivity. This is because the object of reality is not truly absent; the lack is established by the subject's signifying operation, whose purpose in denying reality is to drive the substitution of signification. In this way, the subject's constructed symbolic order requires the Real as a gap to serve as the basis for signification. Thus, the Real is relative to the symbolic order: on the one hand, its existence cannot be negated, as it is the basis for the denial of this structure of thought; on the other hand, in its positivity, the Real embodies a form of pure negativity—an emptiness. From this, we see that the Real possesses an inert positivity, existing both practically and as a foundation for thought, while simultaneously maintaining a resistance to being fully grasped by thought. This paradoxical nature of the Real highlights its role as a lack—something non-existent, yet recognised as existing by the subject.

Therefore, in paradoxical artworks, the representation of the work embodies this inert negativity. Parrhasios's veil and Robert Gober's leg are not merely representations of objects; rather, they incarnate negativity by pretending to be representations of an object. The veil deceives Zeuxis by feigning to be a representation of a veil, while Gober's untitled leg misleads the viewer by suggesting it signifies a complete person. Both of these deceptions imply that something exists behind them when, in fact, there is nothing—an expression of negativity. This deception only becomes apparent and fails when actively scrutinised, reflecting the inertia of its negativity, which remains silent and passive until exposed. Thus, the paradoxical artwork

can be understood as an incarnation of the Real, where this inert negativity embodies the paradoxical nature of the uncanny, maintaining both sides of the paradox simultaneously.

Thirdly, the Real is also defined as corporeal contingency and logical consistency. This concept aligns with Lacan's notion of *Tuché* (Lacan, 2004, p. 53), which refers both to the constant encounter that disrupts the autonomous flow of the symbolic order and the traumatic experience that unsettles the equilibrium of the subject's symbolic world (Žižek, 2008, p. 192). The Real presents itself in an unassimilable manner, a way that resists being fully integrated into the symbolic order (Lacan, 2004, p. 55). The shock of encountering the Real disintegrates the self-referential consistency of the symbolic order, tearing apart its reliable structure as the viewer comes too close to the underlying truth behind the representation. Lacan's conception of the symbolic order mirrors his interpretation of desire's functioning. The truth behind a representation is an artificially constructed void, which drives the signifying operation through its very incompleteness. However, it is not the lack itself but the representation of this lack that functions as the driving force in the subject's engagement with the symbolic order. In psychoanalytic terms, the original experience of inert reality, or lack, is termed *Vorstellung*—the representation of something beyond our thinking (Žižek, 2008, p. 229; Evans, 1996, p. 207). The experience of this lack, which exerts a negative force, is called *Vorstellungrepräsentanz*—a substitute for the absence of representation (Žižek, 2008, p. 179). This is a representation of emptiness that marks the lack. Within the structure of the sign, *Vorstellungrepräsentanz* protects the subject from being consumed by nothingness and motivates the subject's continued operation within the symbolic order. It is not the lack that is absent, but the reproduction of that lack. For instance, when we see a shadow behind a curtain, we might imagine it to be a handsome man or a beautiful maiden, but it could just as easily be a covered hanger. Here, the shadow acts as *Vorstellungrepräsentanz*—it is not truly a lack, but a symbol of rejection. The curtain refuses to reveal the truth behind it, stimulating our imagination of what that truth might be. However, when we get too close to the curtain or attempt to unveil it, the symbolic structure driven by *Vorstellungrepräsentanz* collapses. We may discover that behind the curtain, there is only a hanger, or nothing at all, or perhaps even a wonderful person—but in any case, our imaginative grasp of what lies behind the curtain fails. This is what makes *Tuché* a traumatic, chance encounter.

However, in the case of the uncanny feeling and paradoxical artwork, the failure brought about by *Tuché* is only partially complete. As discussed earlier, the failure of the uncanny—or the uncanny that results from failure—is not the complete collapse of the symbolic order, but rather a confusion in judgment. The experience of the artwork becomes trapped in a state that is neither fully within the symbolic order nor fully in the realm of raw, primitive experience, yet simultaneously both. This confusion represents the failure of the subject's perspective. For example, when confronting Goyer's untitled leg, one can recognise it as a mere sculpture, yet cannot fully ignore that it also seems to represent the leg of a man behind the wall, or maybe it looks like a partially exposed hidden person, but it can not be ignored that it's just a piece of work. This ambiguity captures the essence of the uncanny. Thus, *Tuché* plays a crucial role in initiating the uncanny experience. When the subject gets too close to the *Vorstellungrepräsentanz*, the Real is revealed by the subject, tearing apart the order of alternatives. Simultaneously, driven by *jouissance*—the pleasure derived from rejection and negation, the enjoyment of the inescapable and painful death driving force on the subject—the subject continually returns to the symbolic order in pursuit of the Real encounter, finding pleasure in being rejected by the Real. This is the reason why Lacan's favourite example, Holbein's skull in *The Ambassadors*, fascinates viewers, as it constantly disrupts and reconstructs their perception from different angles. Similarly, paradoxical artworks like Goyer's untitled leg invoke this same repetition of symbolic construction and destruction. The

uncanny experience arises in the moment when existence intersects with both realms: the ambiguous point between life and death, between completeness and destruction. It is within this tension that the Real resides.

The three elaborations above correspond to the psychoanalytic characterization of the Real as a key factor in the emergence of the uncanny, particularly about the failure caused by encountering the Real (the tearing apart and perpetuation of the symbolic order) and paradoxical failure (the confusion of judgment). The Real is the fundamental cause of the uncanny's paradoxical failure, as it simultaneously threatens to dismantle the symbolic order and compels the symbolic order to pursue it. This paradoxical nature of the Real is also what underlies the uncanny's confusion of judgment. In the following section, I will explore how this paradoxicality manifests in artistic practice, gradually evolving through the Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—representation, the failure of representation, and the sublation of that failure.

#### **4. Exposing the Real and Internalising the Real - the Practice paradigm of the Failed Triad**

##### **4.1 Thesis**

Through the logical framework of this triad, it can be observed that the creation of paradoxical artworks follows a dialectical process that unfolds in three stages, ultimately revealing the sublation of failure. The thesis presents an illusion-deception, the antithesis introduces the paradox of failure through representation, unveiling the Real, and the synthesis embodies transitions and retrospectives. To illustrate, let's return to Lacan's example of Zeuxis and Parrhasios. In Zeuxis's painting of realistic grapes, the artwork pretends that its representation is reality—essentially reproducing a representation. By contrast, in Parrhasios's painting of the veil, the artwork utilizes the reality of its "pretended concealment" (as if it were concealing something) to represent reality as mere pretense. Here, the artwork deceives by appearing to deceive: it presents the veil or leg truthfully but pretends that this reality is a representation of something hidden. This breaks the implicit code of deception by revealing the truth (Žižek, 2008, p. 255); in other words, it pretends to pretend. In this thesis stage, whether the artwork offers an alternative representation or pretends to do so, the viewer's initial encounter is with the basic premise of representation. The artwork substitutes a representation (alternative or pretended alternative) for its true referent, successfully 'deceiving' the viewer into believing they are correctly perceiving the object. This illusory deception constitutes the thesis.

##### **4.2 Antithesis**

The distinction between alternative and deceptive representations emerges at the stage of antithesis. In this phase, the subject, having accepted the initial proposition, begins searching for the referent to which the representation corresponds. However, due to the paradoxical nature of deceptive representations—false deception—the subject's attempt to locate the referent results in failure, a failure brought about by the Real. This failure is not a result of the representation's inability to correspond to its referent but rather a negation of the thesis's claim that the work represents something. Consequently, interpreting the antithesis primarily requires an understanding of the paradoxical nature of the Real, which manifests through two main features:

The structural inverse paradox of an object, often referred to as the paradox of a process creating its own cause, can be illustrated through an example from Žižek. He describes a recruit

who pretends to be mentally ill to avoid military service. The recruit obsessively searches through papers, and exclaiming "That is not it!" When the army doctor eventually diagnoses him with mental illness and issues a discharge certificate, the recruit looks at it and screams, "That is it!" (Žižek, 2008, p. 211). In this scenario, the soldier's desire produces the object that fulfills that desire. This mirrors the relationship between the viewer and the artwork in the antithesis stage. The subject, believing the artwork is concealing a deeper truth behind a false appearance, embarks on a search to uncover it. However, upon discovering this deception, the subject realises that there is no hidden truth—only the illusion that something is being concealed. But it is the subject's revelation that allows the operation of this deceptive representation to fail, and the emptiness behind the representation to be exposed, that allows the subject to realise that it is the subject's intention to attempt to expose this fraud that creates the deception of this representation. In this context, The Real is not the primordial experience of the entity, nor a trace left by the primordial experience; the effect of the Real, which seduces the signifying operation to disguise its existence, is created by the erasure of the trace by the signifying operation. Just as the recruit creates the object he is searching for through his repeated failure to find it, the subject generates the 'real' behind the artwork through the failure to recognise, the skepticism about the truth of the representation, and the continuous questioning of it. Yet this constructed real retroactively drives the creation of the initial representation. Through the failure of the artwork to correspond to its referent, the subject exposes the truth of the nothingness behind it. This truth—the Real—reveals that the failure of reference was the very cause that initiated the representation. In this paradoxical process, the subject experiences a second failure. As outlined in Chapter 1, the first failure belongs to the object perspective, while the second failure is a cognitive paradox, a failure from the subject perspective.

The paradox of the signifier reproducing emptiness—the idea that reproduction cannot be reproduced. While the first paradox, where the process creates cause, still operates within the subject-object structure of the proposition, the second paradox centers on the contradiction inherent in the signifier of the object itself. In this case, the signifier of reality within the artwork is not an index of the empirical object but of the Real, meaning it points to its impossibility. Thus, the signifier is a castrated signifier, one that denotes its own lack. In other words, the referent of the signifier is the surplus of the signifying process—the Real, the hardcore that resists signification. This implies that the signifier refers to the impossibility of its own designation, representing 'negativity.' This leads us to the paradox of presenting 'failure' that was introduced earlier: How can 'failure' be presented when its essential negativity defies positive existence? Perhaps the answer lies here. The essential negativity of 'failure' is calibrated through the canonical reference of this paradoxicality. The identity of the Real underpins the paradoxicality, and this reproduction of the definitive lack inherently conflicts with the deceptive illusion created by the artwork. This is the antithesis provided by the paradoxical nature of this signifier.

Finally, it is important to note that the lack revealed by the artwork's pretense is not merely an objectified lack but a lack confirmed by the subject. The lack to which the signifier refers is not external to the Thing-in-itself but an object that the subject has lost. The Real, presented as lack, does not have positive validity as a mere logical emptiness. However, through the subject's 'confirmation' of this loss, the representation of the Real gains positive validity. This validity is established through subjective retrospection—by looking back and recognizing this loss as something missed. Through this process, the paradoxical nature of representations, initially excluded from the thesis of the object due to their positive properties, reassigns the artwork's representation to a new positive position. The difference between the positive properties of the thesis representations and those confirmed through retrospection is that the

thesis's representations derive their positivity from the subject's misrecognition. In contrast, retrospection provides positivity through the subject's recognition of the failure and impossibility of the signifier's referent. This positivity does not stem from a presupposed referent but instead gives shape to the lack behind the signifier, as the subject acknowledges the failure and impossibility of reference. What is referred to, therefore, is not just emptiness but the lack recognised by the subject. As Žižek argues, the Real is Lacan's Thing-in-itself (Žižek, 2008, p. 195), which plays out the negation in the antithesis. This positivity can only be conferred on the object through the subject's participation—through the revelation that ultimately places the subject behind the work, concealing their own subjectivity. In this way, the sublation of 'failure' occurs. This process echoes Hegel's strategy of transforming epistemological impotence into ontological impossibility, thereby restoring the empirical coherence lost in the antithesis (Žižek, 2008, pp. 200-201).

### **4.3 Synthesis**

As seen from the two paradoxes suggested by the antithesis, these contradictions underlie the conflict between the object in the thesis and the act of revelation by the viewing subject. They also account for the failure of the subject's act of revelation. However, as stated earlier, the antithesis is a negation of the thesis, where the subject experiences the failure of alternative representations (skepticism) and the failure of the signifying process (the paradox of the process creating the cause) in order to reveal the hidden vacancy behind the work, the Real. Yet, because the subject confirms the retrospective nature of this lack, the logical 'black hole' that threatens to disrupt all symbolic order is instead transformed into support for a new symbolic order—the order refers to this lack. This transformation becomes the foundation of synthesis. Synthesis, therefore, represents a shift in perspective. It reveals that the failure of representation is not a return to reality but a return to a different representation—one that no longer refers to a real referent but to the emptiness of the Real and the subjectivity of the viewer. Specifically, the thesis asserts, "the work provides a representation"; the antithesis reveals, "the viewer discovers that the representation only pretends to hide an essence, and there is nothing hidden behind it"; and synthesis concludes, "the realization that nothing lies behind the work leads the subject to retrospectively recognise this emptiness as a positive lack—a lack that derives from the subject's own subjectivity." This lack, confirmed by the subject, represents both the absence of meaning behind the artwork, which belongs to the object and the subject's subjectivity, revealed through the subject's own confirmation. The paradoxical structure of both-neither gives rise to an uncanny perception. Therefore, the synthesis reflects the study's theme: "The Uncanny (the ominous representation provided by the artwork) is missed (the subject's retrospective recognition of) Lack (the paradoxicality is determined nothingness )."

Firstly, regarding the absence of object meaning, synthesis achieves the sublation of antithesis through a shift in viewing perspective. This shift transforms what was initially perceived as an obstacle to the thesis into a positive condition for the thesis, acting as a correction and development of the thesis' argument (Žižek, 2008, p. 199). In the antithesis, the paradoxical nature rooted in the Real disrupts the sameness of the thesis, dismantling the subject's process of signifying the work, revealing that "behind the work lies the emptiness created by the work." However, in synthesis, this failure is reframed as a fleeting moment in the self-mediating process of identity (Žižek, 2008, p. 199). Through this experience of destruction, the subject's symbolic order regains a minimal sense of identity, even if this identity is grounded in negativity. This impossibility becomes the foundation of identity. In other words, it is through negation that we label the internal object—akin to the Thing-in-itself or the Real—as lack, and use this label to define the confrontation between the object and subject. When the artwork refuses to answer the subject's question, "What is behind you?" with the Thing-in-itself's

nothingness, the subject paradoxically receives the answer through this nothingness. Therefore, it can also be said that the shift from the experience of lack to the confirmation of lack is the first meaning of synthesis's use of perspective shift to complete the sublation of failure.

Secondly, it is important to consider the subjectivity that emerges through the subject's self-identification. When the viewer mistakes the artwork for a representation, the material identity of the misinterpreted work is replaced by the signifier. As the act of signifying fails, the subject realises that there is no real entity behind the representation—only the possibility of sustaining this hidden, pretended representation. The Real drives this possibility, manifesting as the subject's trace of an unrecognizable emptiness outside of thought through the erasing action of the signifying process. However, this emptiness gains its structural utility as negation only through the subject's identification, as its origin lies not in the object but in the subject's thought. As Žižek explains, this emptiness is both within and beyond the subject—an object within the subject (Žižek, 2008, p. 204).

The subject's confirmation of this emptiness reveals their own impotence, for while it resides within them, it is an emptiness that cannot be fully recognised or grasped. This impotence is what drives the subject to construct itself as a subject. Lacan captures this concept by stating that the subject is 'split' or 'torn' (Lacan, 2017, p. 324). The object within the subject, which tears them apart, manifests as a void relative to the subject, and its existence causes shame. This internal object that both tears the subject apart and is recognised by the subject is, in fact, the subject's own subjectivity. Lacan's famous formula,  $\$ \langle \rangle a$ , points to the subject '\$' torn by the object within it, simultaneously attracted and repelled by it—the Real, or *das Ding* (Žižek, 2008, p. 204). This tension, the repulsion coupled with attraction, defines the subject's subjectivity as a purely negative movement within them (Žižek, 2008, p. 235). The subject seeks to reclaim this negative retrospection by confronting the paradox brought by failure, and through this rejection of the internal other, the subject defines itself. This internal other, and the subject's identification with it, forms another layer of synthesis that completes the sublation of failure. The reason for this is that the subject, by accepting the twofold failure of the work's representation in the antithesis, comes to recognise that the driving force behind their own signifying operation about the work is nothingness. This nothingness exists solely because the subject themselves identifies it. Consequently, the subject realises that the driving force behind the representation, as well as the underlying cause of the work's representational failure, is their own subjectivity. The subject's failed search for nothingness paradoxically supports the proposition that "there is something hidden behind the appearance." In fact, there is something hidden: the subject's own subjectivity, veiled by the very absence of meaning behind the work. This subjectivity, concealed within the representation, marks the transformation from antithesis—arising from paradoxical failure—to synthesis, which sublimates the work's representation.

In the specific process of artistic practice, the Hegelian dialectical structure condenses the paradoxical expression of ideas within art into a rereading of conceptual propositions. In other words, throughout the practice of creating an artwork, the expression of ideas should resist becoming a declarative act akin to a philosophical proposition. As Joseph Kosuth asserted, "Conceptual art will ultimately replace philosophy," meaning that the relationship between the definition of art and art itself lies entirely in the integrity of the artist's concept of art (Alberro, A., 1999, p.xx). Within this aesthetic paradigm, the conceptual framework tends to solidify ideas in a static state within the proposition of the work, excluding the possibility of interpretive engagement by the viewer. In contrast, when the communication of ideas in the artwork relies on paradox to enable a rereading of the proposition by the viewer, the inherent paradox of the proposition—though it may formally and textually obstruct the viewer's interpretation—becomes a productive failure. This failure, in its negativity, propels the viewer to *experience*

the paradox through their own subjective lens. In other words, it is precisely because the artist deliberately maintains a loose or even contradictory logical relationship between the subjective conception prior to the work and the sensuous experience that follows its realization, that the viewer is able to spontaneously engage in a dialectical practice of interpretation. This occurs amid semantic ambiguity or contradiction and in the tension between their expectations and the reflection or negation of those expectations. Thus, the viewer moves beyond a reductive understanding of the artist's "paradoxical concept" and, through the experience of failed interpretation, engages with the negative essence of the paradox itself. This dialectical process of practice allows the artwork to transcend being merely a crystallization of the artist's personal thought or historical context, and instead opens up the right and possibility of interpretation to the "infinite audience" (LeWitt, 1967, p.12). This is also the paradigm of practice proposed by LeWitt, wherein the work, by actively introducing contradictions and ambiguities in its expressive intent, creates a space for self-negation. Within this space, the viewer's experience of the negation of the concept facilitates the *sublation* of subjectively predetermined meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

This study seeks to develop a dialectical approach centered on the failure to explore how paradoxical artworks can reveal their underlying nature through the participation of the viewing subject. This essay focuses on the proposition of 'the uncanny as a missed lack' and the 'failure dialectic,' which realises this approach within the artwork. Drawing on Lacan's psychoanalytic perspective and Žižek's reading of Hegel's dialectic, the essay constructs a framework for artistic creation that generates the uncanny feeling through failure. By employing the Hegelian triad's sublation, failure transforms the essence of the work from a representation of an entity to a representation of the subject's awareness of lack (subjectivity) and the work's truth (the Real). In this process, the experience of the paradoxical nature of the revealed truth—the notion that the process creates the result and the reproduction of that which cannot be reproduced—leads the subject into a 'both-neither' pattern, allowing the uncanny to emerge. The study attempts to reveal the 'real' hidden behind the artwork by reproducing the uncanny feeling. Through both the failure of representation and the failure of deception, the nothingness that is determined to exist and the subject's subjectivity become the truths revealed by the work. It is precisely because these two truths possess paradoxical qualities—simultaneously embodying both presence and absence, certainty and uncertainty, the object and the subject—that the uncanny, a 'contradiction of judgment,' is preserved within the artwork. This is the central aim of the paper: to propose a dialectical methodology of failure as an artistic process that reveals paradoxical ideas.

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