

# VATTIMO'S DECLINE OF ART IN GERTRUDE STEIN'S "A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION"

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## **Abstract**

Reading the poem "A substance in a Cushion", by Gertrude Stein, and at the same time reciting the old, elevated poems of the great poets of the past, one would unconsciously question what it means to be a poet in the modern and postmodern world. When someone recites a traditional poem, like any simple piece of poetry by Wordsworth or Coleridge, he or she will be stunned by how they would make lots and lots of momentous lines out of a straightforward natural element in the world. This contrast is what Gianteressio Vattimo calls the decline of art in the modern world. This essay focuses on one of Gertrude Stein's iconoclastic poems called "A Substance in a cushion" and applies Vattimo's ideas concerning the decline of art to his interpretation. Most people nowadays detest the tendency of the modern and post-modern works to shatter the forms, meanings, and the whole notion of real poetry. Poetry should have some rules and obligations, which are what makes it exquisite. Modern artists present anything as art or poetry. Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) was an avant-garde and feminist poet. Her poems do not hold a fixed meaning but offer a kind of unconventional experience.

**Keywords:** Gianteressio Vattimo, Decline of Art, Gertrude Stein, Avant-Garde, Postmodern Poetry.

## EL DECLIVE DEL ARTE EN “A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION” DE GERTRUDE STEIN SEGÚN VATTIMO

### Resumen

Leyendo el poema “A substance in a Cushion” de Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) y si al mismo tiempo recitamos los poemas sublimes de los grandes poetas del pasado, podríamos preguntarnos inconscientemente: ¿Qué significa ser un poeta en el mundo moderno y postmoderno? Pues cuando alguien recita cualquier poema tradicional, como uno de Wordsworth o Coleridge, se queda pasmado ante cómo extraen memorables versos de un sencillo elemento natural del mundo. A este contraste es a lo que Gianteressio Vattimo llama el declive del arte en el mundo moderno. Este artículo estudia un poema iconoclasta de Gertrude Stein, titulado “A Substance in a Cushion”, y aplica las ideas de Vattimo a su valoración. La gente, en su mayor parte, detesta la tendencia de los poetas modernos y posmodernos a sacudir las formas, significados y la noción misma de poesía real. La poesía debería seguir ciertas reglas y obligaciones, que son las que la convierten en un producto exquisito, mientras que la poesía moderna presenta cualquier cosa como obra artística. Gertrude Stein fue una poeta vanguardista y feminista. Sus poemas no tienen un significado concreto, sino que, más bien, ofrecen un tipo de experiencia no convencional.

**Palabras clave:** Gianteressio Vattimo, declive del arte, Gertrude Stein, vanguardia, poesía posmoderna.

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## Introduction

Modern poetry proposes two ideas regarding form and content: the first one is that nothing matters and the second is to always follow your heart. This means that there are no rules and prescribed forms for modern and postmodern poetry, just a set of ideas, whether they are meaningful or not. There are no productive poets in our times. Probably, if poems such as Poe's *Raven* or Grey's *Elegy* were composed today, people would again gather around the fire and read them aloud. Nowadays, elevated and eloquent poetry has lost its voice and its readers around the world.

Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) was an American novelist, poet, playwright, and art collector. Born within the Allegheny West neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and raised in Oakland, California, Stein moved to Paris in 1903 and made France her home for the rest of her life. She organized a Paris salon, where the leading figures of innovation in writing and craftsmanship, such as Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson and Henri Matisse, would meet. Gertrude Stein is marked as one of the most innovative and ambiguous modernist poets. We always detect a colloquial tension between meaning and non-meaning, order and chaos in her poems that cannot be interpreted completely. In the present study, we will demonstrate that phenomenology provides an effortless method to discuss the dialectic of her poem "A Substance in a Cushion". The question is how in the age of decline of art, the work of art challenges its traditional values and in what way poetry is meaningful only when estimated by modern language and images.

In a private letter to his brother Karl, Anderson said, "As for Stein, I do not think her too important. I do think she had an important thing to do, not for the public, but for the artist who happens to work with words as his material" (Mellow 1974: 260). This playing with words and not the meaning is of prime importance here. Stein's treatment of language

compels the reader to make sense of it. This struggle with language forced her to “make it ugly”; she held the same opinion about Pablo Picasso’s work when he inaugurated the cubist movement, a style which many critics linked to Stein’s poetry. She declared, “something had been coming out of him, certainly it had been coming out of him, certainly it was something, certainly it had been coming out of him and it had meaning” (Stein 1972: 293).

An Italian philosopher, Gianteressio Vattimo was born on January 4th, 1936 in Turin, Piedmont. He studied philosophy under the existentialist Luigi Pareyson at the University of Turin and graduated in 1959 with a thesis on Aristotle that was published in 1961. He was also involved in activism and participated in protests against South African apartheid. Vattimo took up a position as an adjunct professor at the university in 1964 to teach aesthetics, especially those of Heidegger. He later became a full professor of Aesthetics in 1969. He became a professor of theoretical Philosophy in 1982. He is currently a visiting professor at several American Universities. Vattimo is considered among the most influential living philosophers and is known for his interpretation of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s philosophies. His nihilistic reading of history involves a certain attitude towards modernity (Harris 1995).

One of Vattimo’s fundamental theories is the “weak thought notion”, the idea that the history of western metaphysics is the history of the weakening of strong structures (Harris 1995). He implies one should not aspire to settled philosophical answers or certainty in knowledge but expect the numerous interpretations proper of late modernity. Weak thought attempts to devise an ethic of weakness.

## **2. Vattimo’s Decline of Art in Getrude Stein’s “A Substance in a Cushion”**

In his article “The Decline of Anglo-American Poetry” (1978), Christopher Clausen remarks that poetic spoken language is so constantly and relentlessly manipulated for the function of salesmanship that it has become almost impossible to express anything with ebullience or joy or utter a sentence without running into the danger of sounding as if you were selling something. How can the poet write in a heartfelt way about green fields in springiness if a great voice of the audience one-half-consciously associates them with toilet paper? How to talk affectingly about erotic love to any but the most unsophisticated when love is the staple of advertising

for everything from children's toothpaste to Geritol? What about freedom and commonwealth in an era of televised war and political campaigns? The consequence is: "There are no poets today—not even Robert Frost—who can communicate with as large a portion of the literate public as Tennyson and Longfellow did in their time." (Hayakawa 1949, quoted by Frost 1978: 76).

The judgment is on the side of the reader. Both Heidegger and Vattimo truly acknowledged that what presents you with truth can be considered art nowadays, even if it is the artist's rubbish. Yet what is the definition of art for a specific reader? The meaning reader is attempting to find in a piece of poetry is another side of the coin. Stein's poetry may seem flawless and perfect to a modern reader but the opposite to another. According to Vattimo, as long as art presents truth and endeavors to alter established notions, its acceptability is a matter of taste. In the mentioned poem by Stein, one simply cannot locate any fixed meaning. In short, it's chattering jargon. They call it verbal cubism. The poet may make sense from some words without having a singular meaning in mind. It is like a painting that just looks nice: there's no deeper meaning other than beautiful lines and contrasting colors. It's a mere appeal to the senses. This idea immediately reminds Vattimo's comments on the aesthetics of the decline of art. In the chapter from *The End of Modernity* entitled "The Death or Decline of Art", Vattimo defines three forms of "death of art" characteristic of aesthetic thought in the twentieth century: 1. Reintegration into existence; 2. Aestheticization of experience through mass culture, where the common consensus is produced through instituting the aesthetic sense of sharing the same criteria; and 3. Adorno's theory of the avant-garde as silence in response to the kitsch of modern culture (Ziarek 2011: 24). Vattimo maintains a Heideggerian view of art, in which art is caught beyond aesthetics and its metaphysical thought, concerning the truth of the work of art. He assumes that the experience produced in a work of art is possible by shattering its words, the exact thing that Stein does in this poem. Stein's poetry is going to have meaning, essence, and content but what it presents us is just noise and music. This poem is a kind of segmented and jumble of words which don't make sense when you put it together. You may not know what the meaning is altogether; they are just a series of words. This is exactly what Heidegger and Vattimo call "nothing" in a work of art. That is the exact concept that Nietzsche exposed in *On Truth and Lie*.

If you are looking for something graceful and elegant in modern poetry, then you are proceeding completely wrongly. There are no objective forms

of aesthetics or beauty, as Vattimo explains. One should not pursue sublimity in modernist and postmodernist poetry. The contemporary poets have gone far away from their ancestors Shakespeare, Tennyson, Shelly, or Keats. These poems were the most elevated gauges of brilliance and excellence. Yet, something occurred in the transit to the twentieth century: the significant, the rousing, and the delightful were supplanted by the new, the different, and the monstrous. What arrived was the temporality of work of art in the modern world, as Vattimo declares. Since a poem does not arouse any deep feeling in us, why should we learn it by heart or recite it?

In *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event* (2001), Krzysztof Ziarek acknowledges that this iconoclastic and even humorous poem by Stein is the reoccurring and rethinking of every day. It is something ordinary according to what Heidegger and Vattimo consider. And this ordinariness is something that just happens in modern art. Ziarek accepts that even the language of this poetry is typical and mundane, considering that Stein's work is an avant-garde "poetics of event", since Stein states the nouns and names without using them, thus adding to their everydayness. (Ziarek 2001: 26 and 151-185).

Stein brings art to the deck of the prosaic and the mundane, so everything depends on our interpretation of this ordinariness in the modern world. We are now living in a world that is a facet of the more general condition of the end of metaphysics. It is the end or decline of artistic forms of literature, especially poetry. This doesn't mean that free verse is not beautiful or lyrical. The first generation of poets who endeavored to write free verse like Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, and Eliot were great poets of prominent impact. Reading their poetry is enjoyable, but from then on, some kind of nasty poetry emerged which one may reluctantly call art or even a piece of literature. One of the main reasons that people nowadays do not read poems is the fact that no good ones have been written by any good poet. The main readers and admirers are now poets themselves. Today the senseless, the futile, and the offensive are held up as the best of modern art. Vattimo believes in the nothingness and the nihilistic view of art in the modern world. And that is really what's going on in the literature of our time. Our literature is going to pave a boring and vague path for the next generation of artists.

To better discuss Stein's poem, one should consider that she has completely discarded intense language and artistic meters for the sake of everyday words and prose rhythms. Meter is the fundamental aspect of

traditional poetry but at the same time, it is the very thing we cannot locate in modern poetry. Modern and postmodern philosophers of poetry do not believe in rules or regulations regarding art. Stein's poem has no meter, it seems more like prose than poetry, and it still claims to affect the readers so much as a traditional poem with metrical elements. The funniest coincidence is that today those poets who write in traditional meters, like Edgar Bowers, have to apologize for their backwardness (Clausen 1978: 79).

Stein's poem is an outstanding example of what Vattimo calls the death of art. The death of art is one of many different events that occur to the post-metaphysical subject. But how did this happen? Beginning in the late 19th century, a group called the Impressionists opposed the French institute des Beaux-Arts and its established measures. The Impressionists or the new modernists inaugurated aesthetic relativism. Based on aesthetic relativism, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But with each new generation standards declined until there were no standards. Today we can call this phenomenon the decline of artistic standards and all that was left was personal expression. The first person who proposes the idea of the death of art was Giorgio Vasari, a sixteenth-century biographer, and historian, and less than 300 years later, it was Hegel who in 1828 alluded to the concept of the death of art. In his last speech, Hegel predicted that with the emerging of the industrial and modern world, art will decline sooner or later. In 1984, Arthur Danto published an essay called "Death of art". He claimed that this essay is an answer to the awful situation of the world of art, for which he was searching for a solution. Although we cannot consider industrialization and modernism as the only causes of the death of art, such developments had vast effects on the changing of tastes and views on art.

Gombrich in his *The Story of Art* ends this debate by declaring that nothing as art exists but an artist: "There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists" (Gombrich 1951: 5). Vattimo thinks that with the death of art in modern times, the truth of art will reveal itself. Although this poses a contradiction, what Vattimo means by truth is that "nothing" which Heidegger assumes that happens in the painting of Van Gogh. Vattimo warns us against understanding the idea of the death of art as a strictly defined fact. It is impossible to establish exactly when art terminated because this notion does not relate to the actual exhaustion of humankind's creative potential, as one might expect. Vattimo witnesses the end of art as a utopia of reintegration, as an anesthetization of mass culture, and an

authentic art's suicide and silence. So, the death of aesthetic philosophy mirrors the death of art.

Christopher Clausen in his paper "The Decline of Anglo-American poetry" cunningly remembers that Robert Frost in a famous exaggeration compared writing free verse to the act of playing tennis without a net (Clausen 2003: 80). This kind of game is funny and tedious enough even to watch, like the modern kind of poetry is not worthwhile to read and discuss. Modernist poets and critics believe that traditional English meters are outdated and should be replaced by the rhythms of everyday speech. This norm has prevailed since Pound blamed iambic pentameter. Nowadays, only children's poetry has the traditional rhyme and meter. Even Percy Bysshe Shelly, the great poet of the romantic period, assumed that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Modernist and postmodernist poets like Stein, Riley and so many others reveal nothing about truth and teach us nothing. As Vattimo accepts, poetry makes nothing happen in the modern world. So, he assumes that the death of aesthetic philosophy mirrors the death of art. And it is something to which we must yield, from which we must heal ourselves, and to which we must resign ourselves (Vattimo 2000: 192).

The situation of death or decline of art in which we are living today is philosophically interpretable as one aspect of one more general event, concerning the term being. In Nietzsche's nihilism, the being is what disappears and perishes. Being is not what remains but rather what is born and dies. So, we deal with the framework of an accomplished metaphysics that has arrived at its end (Vattimo 2000: 192). From Vattimo's point of view, the death of art is the end of metaphysics, as prophesized by Hegel, as lived by Nietzsche and as registered by Heidegger. What is destined for us, and is something which we simply cannot ignore is the prophesy or utopia of a society in which art no longer exists as a specific phenomenon but has been suppressed and ablated through a general anesthetization of existence (Vattimo 2000: 188). As in the case of Stein's poetry, we use every other art as a mere equipment or tool. For instance, we deal with an art like photography, not for creating certain artistic effects but for its most elementary function of duplication. Therefore, it is not a matter of self-reference but a question of facts linked to the death of art in the sense of an explosion of aesthetics (Vattimo 2000: 188). This form of utility and usefulness happens when there is no genius on the part of the artist. The world that we live in today is the world of the death of art, the poetry that we read and hear today is the poetry of the age of decline of art. In this

artificial world, Vattimo believes that silence would be the language of real art (Sosnoski 1992: 310).

As long as the true concept of art concerns, one does not consider Stein's poetry or any new form of art real, because they intentionally distort the traditional meanings and values of art. When we encounter such poems or artworks like the one of Stein, we should consider the fact that we didn't lose the real art, but the reality and the values have been degraded and lost their essence. The modernist and postmodernist truth is that the core and essence of an artist's point of view has been reduced to something defective and nonsense. From the Marx period to modern times, art is being produced in large amounts like products. Marx believes that art has a deep connection with economics. Therefore, what we read today as lines of poetry and the fact that we sometimes appraise artists and critics is not for aesthetic enjoyment but sale and trade.

Still, Vattimo's viewpoint is that we cannot estimate the true value of art when we still believe in the traditional norms, and to grasp the real essence and meaning of a piece of poetry, architecture, or painting, we should evaluate them by the postmodernist language and images. If we want to estimate the worth of Stein's poem "A Substance in a Cushion", we should read her contemporary poets or the postmodernist poetry, like a composition by Theophile Marzial's, entitled "A Tragedy" (1873), which begins like this: "Death! / Plop. / The barges down in the river flop. / Flop, plop". That's exactly what Lynne Tilman mentions in her essay "Reconsidering the Genius of Gertrude Stein" (2012): "Stein's work of consciousness depends on the reader's consciousness and unconsciousness to engage them". Just like Foucault, Vattimo rejects the idea of the evolution of art and supposes that art just moves from one level to another. In every phase, each paradigm loses its qualification and gives its way to another paradigm. Yet unfortunately, Vattimo acknowledges that the modern paradigm is the distortion of all traditional ones. That is what we are witnessing in Stein's poem as a modern type of art.

Another crucial factor is the role of the artist and poet that is being shattered in the modern world. There is no trace of dignity and worthiness concerning the traditional role of the poet anymore. No longer has the poet any access to the ultimate realm of the truth. The poet has lost the ability to move the reader as traditional poetry accomplished so many times. Nowadays, the poet has been put out of the stage and people are reluctant to read any line of poetry: they prefer listening to music or watching movies that impress them more. From the twentieth century on, the role of the poet

is superfluous, and we do not feel their need anymore. In the case of the artist as a poet, with the breakdown of these objective ideas of what constitutes the beautiful or what constitute the sublime, anything that art can display, do or say, anything that labels poetry can be practiced and put on display, whether it has any meaning or significance at all. What happens is that nobody ever trusts the role of the poet in this sense anymore. Hence modernists and postmodernists like Gertrude Stein somehow began to deconstruct these ideas and metaphysical thought systems. They became the suspects and so many individuals targeted them as a kind of criminal for misleading the readers from the true core of the real poetry. What happens in Stein's poetry is the rejection of any specific standard proper of traditional poetry. Poets like Stein are bored of the normal way of exploiting words and are searching for a new method of expressing themselves. Some may think that poetry does not affect much in the ground scheme of things, but it emulates life and therefore informs us something about the health of the society in which we are living in. We cannot live without poetry, and that poetry should awaken the sense of sublime and exquisite in us, the dream that modern and postmodern poetry can no longer fulfill. And this degradation is a cultural tragedy for postmodern art.

Stein's poem requires a new way of reading, a journey into starts and stops by juxtaposing merely no emotional lines of poetry. One should not read the poem to make sense; rather it is read for the sake of its sounds and music. In reading this poem we should abandon completely any preconceptions about traditional usual poetry. This poem consists of some dull, no descriptive words. At first glance, one may think it is prose, not poetry since the lines are long and there is no rhyme. The question is how can we infer deep meanings from poetry like this? How can we compare these lines to the traditional poems of the eighteenth or even nineteenth century? Is it not just like a painter who throws paint on the canvas and then attempts to find meaning for his art? Some may find this kind of art innovative, but the truth is that there is no technique, no essence or soul in these works. By rejecting the conversions of early nineteenth-century literature, Stein developed a different way of expression that was more like the work of post-impressionists and cubists in visual art. Renate Stendhal in his essay "Why the witch hunts against Gertrude Stein?" (2012) mentioned that Stein was one of the most well-known but least read American poets. Her writing was not welcomed in her lifetime, and she was forced to publish them. Vattimo does not believe in the Hegelian Death of art. Art cannot perish. As long as we live, we encounter different forms of art,

whether we applaud it or not. What Vattimo means by the death of art is the decline of artistic creations. It is not death because when we consider phenomena to be dead, we mean that it can no longer exist and get reborn. When we consider the death of poetry for the modern times in which we live, we mean that we no longer have any kind of grandiose poetry. Although everybody knows that we can still have so many poets that regenerate the sublimity, the truth is that the traditional brilliant substance cannot be recreated in our time. There is no regeneration of those old, elevated poets. Something has declined and lost its essence in our time. That's the captivating and efficacious shapes and contents in poems. Gertrude Stein is not an exception. We should not expect a modern poet not to follow the fashion of her contemporaries. Picasso at her time painted several pictures which were greeted as a new form called cubism, while the public knew that those pictures didn't keep any adherence to the traditional rules.

B. L. Reid in his book *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting opinion of Gertrude Stein* (1958) states that most of Stein's writing and poetry is unreadable and there is no intellectual value in her art. He further added that her poetry is not written for the normal mind and that one may waste his or her time reading her poetry (Reid 1958: 93). In an article called "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot" (2007), Michael Gold frankly criticized Stein for her art and poetry. He expressed that Gertrude Stein's work shows a vivid example of the most extreme subjectivism of the contemporary bourgeois artist and a reflection of the ideological anarchy into which the whole of bourgeois literature has fallen. He goes so far as to call her art insanity. And he even calls this madness deliberate. He believes that she makes bad poetry just because she didn't grasp the nature of art and the function of language fully (Gold 2007: 24-25).

We may try our best to grasp what is hidden inside Stein's poem and still we may be unsuccessful. Stein somehow shatters the normal way of using grammar and syntax. As Gold claims, she does not care to communicate with her readers, because so far she does not have anything to communicate at all (Gold 2007: 25). Gold blames her wealth for this error. He supposes she did not have to worry about anything but producing nonsense (Gold 2007: 25). Modern philosophy believes in what the reader conceives from the total idea of the work. As long as the artist is successful to convey a truth, we can call the work a piece of art. In "Heidegger's Philosophy of Art", Julian Young mentions Heidegger's view that while the art of great Homer and Sophocles gathered an entire culture together, the

modern art only exists for the enjoyment of a few groups (Young 2001: 12). What it means is “for us today, art belongs in the domain of pastry chef” (Thomson 2011: 46). Stein’s poetry may appeal to some modern readers who advocate the irregular forms of art and adhere to them just for the sake of its beauty. But in fact, it is what Hegel, Heidegger, and Vattimo call the loss of true sense. In the *Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger beautifully explains:

Art no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth obtains existence for itself. One may well hope that art will continue to advance and perfect itself but it’s for has ceased to be the highest need of the spirit. In all these relationships, art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation, something past (Heidegger 1971: 80).

Therefore, according to Heidegger, we should not expect from a line of poetry like “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” to convey truth. Or in the poem “A Substance in a Cushion”, discussed in this article, “Sugar is not vegetable” does not satisfy our highest need of the spirit. As it has been mentioned several times in this paper, true art is of yore. Natalia Cecire in her article “Ways of not reading Gertrude Stein” maintains that Stein’s works establish a tight loop between the unreadable text and the non-reading of that text: the unreadable text precludes reading, while the conventions of non-reading (diagnosis, sampling, and viewing) produce the text as unreadable—indeed, as, in a certain sense, not text. Like the body itself, Stein’s writing cannot be read, only sampled, tested, anatomized, and diagnosed—treated quite literally like a corpus (Cecire 2015: 293).

Something worth mentioning is that newness is one of the most vital qualities of avant-guard. Everything can be coined and regarded as a new element in poetry. For instance, the line “Callous is something that hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men” does not seem like the ordinary line of poetry, even in a blank poem. Although these kinds of poems do not have regular rhyme and rhythms, they follow some rules regarding the breaking of the sentence into readable musical lines. We do not witness such points in this poem. It is as if Stein has some pieces of a puzzle in her mind and she just strained to put them all together neglecting their right order. It is remarkable how many times the words “difference” and “change” are repeated in the poem. For sure she is adhering to changes. But is this change the medium which would alter the spirit of art in society?

Will it upgrade art to a better stage? Modern poets like Stein tend to put an end to something that had a beginning and a middling. Poetry and art in the modern and postmodern world maintain a necessary feeling of ending a phase that has commenced a long time ago. Stein protests the fact that the poem should have legibility, structure, and fixed meaning. From the modern time forward, everything is about the end. It is all about taking over a precious burden that so many artists have carried on their backs for a long time, as if they desired to make themselves free of these confinements, regulations, and hardships that make the poetry what it is and what it should be. The question here is whether the excuse for inserting something new and odd which does not possess any beauty at all is convenient or not. Stein is just like so many spoilers who try to ruin the ending. And she thinks it is just a beginning of an ending, the beginning of the ending of poetry and art. This is the end of metaphysics as mentioned occasionally by Vattimo.

We can skim Gertrude Stein's poetry from a different angle. She somehow breaks the rules as Pound and Eliot did, as Picasso designed in his paintings. It is a new form and at the same time a new being. She inaugurated a tradition that shatters the old ways of meaning and content of poetry. She injected everydayness and mundane into her poems. She constructed something new. As Vattimo has maintained, the perpetual innovations of modernity build conditions by which innovation alone is primed to flourish (59). Tony Tost in his thesis "Machine Poetics: Pound, Stein and the Modernist Imagination", confirmed this fact by a reference to another icon of modernism: Marcel Duchamp's submission of a urinal, titled "*Fountain*" with the pseudonym R. Mutt, for an exhibition in New York in 1917 (45), which was a big shock. Later Duchamp wrote this in defense:

What were the grounds for refusing Mr Mutt's fountain: -- 1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar. 2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing. Now Mr Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows. Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view -- created a new thought for that object. As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges (Duchamp 1917, in Harrison and Wood 2003: 63).

When Duchamp formed a new thought and presented it as a new kind of art, he assembled the first brand new thought for it. The urinal was successful not because it was placed in the exhibition, but by shattering the norms through its refused entry (Tost 2011: 46). Perhaps it's the same refusal and objection that Stein was expecting to receive to authenticate that her art possessed an innovation and distinction. In a 1924 letter published in the *Transatlantic Review*, Mina Loy condemns those who ignore the impact of modernity and modernism by saying:

Modernism is a prophet crying in the wilderness of stabilized culture that humanity is wasting its aesthetic time. For there is a considerable extension of time between the visits to the picture gallery, the museum, the library. It asks what is happening to your aesthetic consciousness during the long long intervals? The flux of life is pouring its aesthetic aspect into your eyes, your ears—and you ignore it because you are looking for your canons of beauty in some sort of frame or glass case of tradition . . . Would not life be lovelier if you were constantly overjoyed by the sublimely pure concavity of your wash bowls? (Loy 1924: 429-430)

On the other hand, in “Sense, Science and the Interpretations of Gertrude Stein”, Robert Chodat calls Stein the creator of unrelenting randomness and states:

Are Stein's portraits no better than a linguistic random-number generator? Stein of course spent a long time in crafting her texts, sometimes months. What, then, could she have been doing all that time if her texts are simply akin to an infant's rambling mutterings? And what reason is there for us, in turn, to continue reading her texts at all? (Chodat 2005: 597)

## Conclusion

Apart from all these criticisms and acclamations of Stein's work, what is truly evident in Stein's poetry is the undeniable decline of art that Vattimo discussed in his objections on the part of art and the artist. As Vattimo noticed, the main motivation for this decline is the growing technology that modern society is struggling with. The technology and the extension of mass media in the modern world paved the way for the new artists and poets to disturb the quiet harmless atmosphere of tradition. It's somehow the echoes of Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern nihilism. Therefore, in this ontology of decline, every thought like that of Stein's underlying concepts of her poems opens itself up to the fallen and negative

meanings in art. What the readers today encounter as poetry is a mechanical reproduction of ideas and validities that would rarely awaken the feeling of sublimity in them. For Vattimo, this witness of the decline of art is not so negative, since this is the only condition that we can find to understand the being, the founding of true art. Poets like Stein and artists like Duchamp assist us to come to a new understanding. That new achievement is the appreciation of true work of art.

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