



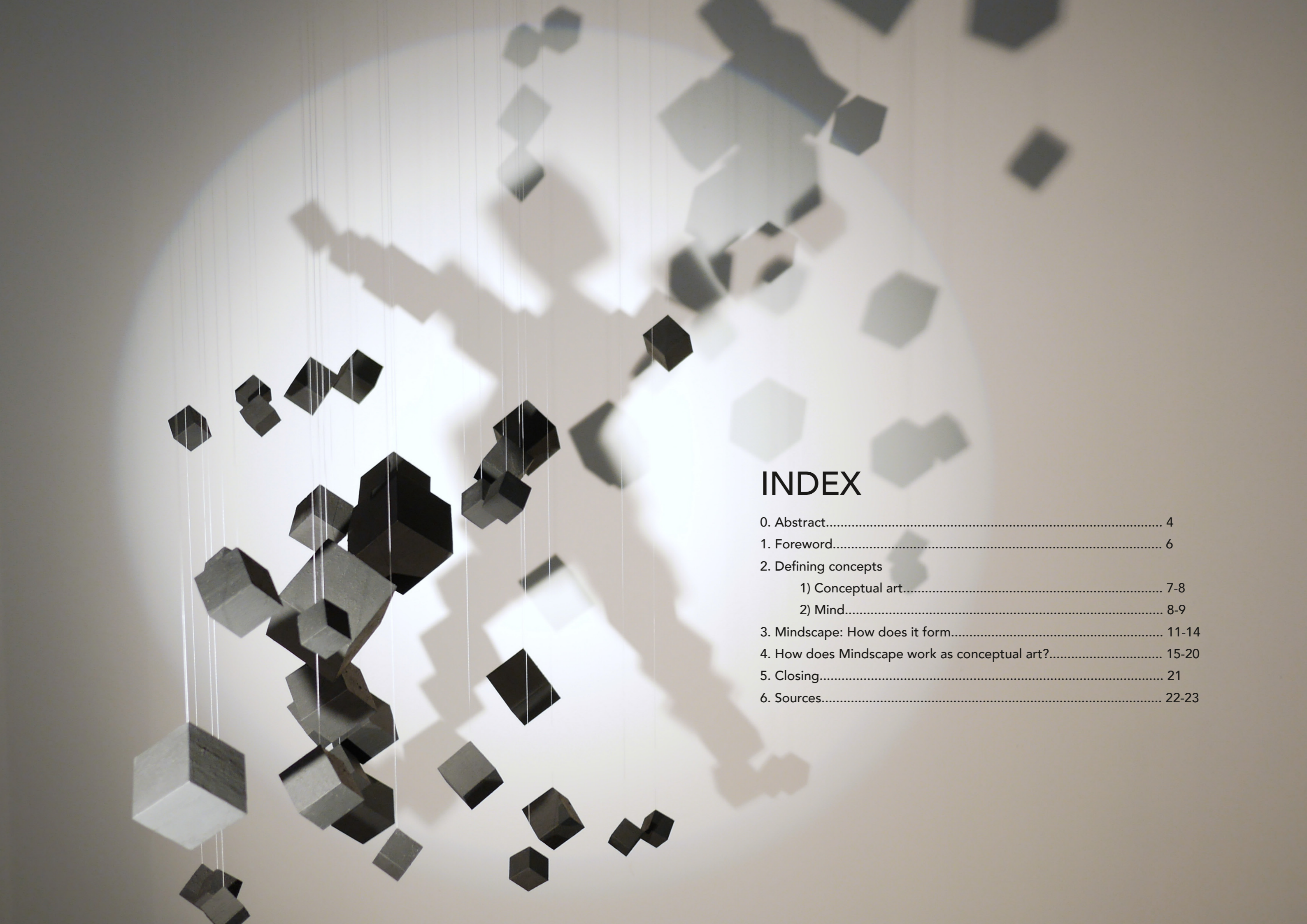
# MINDSCAPE

How does the sculpture installation *Mindscape* follow the tradition of conceptual art?

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2014

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## ABSTRACT

In the literary part of my thesis I stop to analyse my own piece from the angle of conceptual art: how does the work process and acknowledging the art idea a priori affect the outcome. I will also reflect on different form of conceptual art and what the role of it is in contemporary art.

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Lopputyöni kirjallisessa osassa tutkin oman teokseni sisältöjä käsitetaiteen diskursseilla. Miten teoksen teko prosessi ja teoksen idean tiedostaminen a priori vaikuttaa lopputulokseen ja oikeuttaako se teokseni sijoittamisen käsitetaiteen kenttään. Pysähdyn myös pohtimaan käsitetaiteen erimuotoja ja sen merkitystä nykyaiteessa.





# 1. FOREWORD

My thesis work *Mindscape* is a prototype of the human mind. The definition presented here of the term "mind" is explained from my work's point of view. I will also present different theories on what is conceptual art and analyze my piece reflecting these angles.

The reason I ask how the sculpture installation *Mindscape* follows the tradition of conceptual art, is due to my process as an artist. Throughout my studies in TAMK Fine Art programme I have been very theme oriented. My works always start with an idea, conundrum or an event I find interesting, something that arouses my curiosity. The medium gets born from within the process of how I address my concept. My visual language is varied and has certain conventions in different mediums, but before *Mindscape* I did not stop to think upon my aesthetics from the conceptual art point of view. To be honest, *Mindscape* is the first piece where I have been constantly aware of my work as conceptual art. In this essay I aim to make a critical evaluation of my work and the motives behind it in the frame of the discourses of conceptual art.

*Mindscape* is formed of wooden cubes covered with glue and black pigment. The cubes from line attached to a thin wood panel. Three spot lights point to the cubes and are programmed to change through fade in and fade out. One of the lights makes the cubes form the shadow of a human figure, the other two form seemingly random figures.

# 2. DEFINING CONCEPTS

## 2.1 Conceptual art

**Sol LeWitt**, a pioneer of conceptual art said "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (1967). Based on **Hegel's** philosophy on languages we can consider the meaning of conceptual art as a semiotic game and not just conceptual art, but all art. We use common marks, visual or audio to explain something that is not necessarily vivid from a first glance. **Kirk Varnedoe** says "Abstract [conceptual] art is always a symbolic game"<sup>1</sup>. The basic idea seems to be that the artist has a concept and avoiding formal aesthetics brings the piece to be by the means of the concept. In this way, the beauty of the piece emerges from the viewers' realisation of the concept behind the visual. Thus avoiding known aesthetics the artist leaves more space for subjective association, which is the core of enjoying and seeing art as "a symbolic game" . According to Hegel, this is very characteristic to humankind since the basics of our communication, language, works the same way.

What exactly is meant by "formal aesthetics"? Within conceptual art everything is defined by the concept, material, colour and shape. According to the Cambridge dictionary aesthetics is in relation with the idea of beauty. Beauty can be defined in many ways in research of aesthetics, but what is relevant to conceptual art is whether aesthetics is something to be judged by taste alone or for the sake of function: why does the particular *object d'art* exist? **Lucy Lippard** suggests that art done for the sake of beauty is "mindless art... visual Muzak". This trail of thought brings us to the art idea: how far can or should the conceptualism be taken? **Joseph Kosuth** suggests that the purest form of conceptual art is when the artist takes an *a priori* point of view to art itself <sup>2</sup>. This is the field where artists are searching and stretching the boundaries of what can be understood as art, which has a long tradition starting from **Duchamp's Dadaism**.

<sup>1</sup>Original: North American Art Critic, 2006

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy*, 1969



I do not believe that this is the sole purpose of conceptual art even though it seems to hold the strongest stance within the field. In accordance to the conceptualism's idea as "a symbolic game"<sup>3</sup> I consider conceptual art as a tool that can be used on any idea, not just to argue the meta-level of art. For example, the way **Christine Borland** uses the methods and language of science to demonstrate the physicality of human beings. On a more conceptual level the body is present as the home of the mind, where we can discover her suggestions of the fine line that goes between body and mind which is a very dualist concept. Looking at her choices on materials and the communication with science and other known symbols from other fields than art, we can see how the aesthetics are used to give a meaning and not for the sake of beauty itself, like in her works *Spirit Collection: Hippocrates* and *The Velocity of Drops Stairwell -Running, Falling and Rising*. Thus we can link it to "idea art", conceptual art.

## 2.2 Mind

A factor that is very relevant in studying the human mind from the angle of philosophy of the mind and psychology is *self*. Psychology professor **Michael Horne** starts his article "Elephants painting? Selfness and the emergence of self states as illustrated in conceptual art", 2009 by saying "The traditional view of the self is that of a singular entity whose ground is an inherent function of the mind. The more recent contemplation of the self is moving toward the social constructionism concept that its ground is the discourses of the particular culture into which one is born." To my mind this is not such a modern idea since **John Locke** introduced the idea of *Tabula rasa*<sup>4</sup> already in the 17th century. What is new, is how Horne suggests that the word self should be named again as *selfness*, which is the ground from where different *self states* would emerge. I see that this theory converses with philosopher **Davidson's** thoughts, *token-identity theory*<sup>5</sup>, on how our thoughts, attitudes, and desires are born from our physical surroundings, which

<sup>3</sup> Original: Vernadoc, Goldie & Schellekens 2007

<sup>4</sup> Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Kenneth P. Winkler (ed.) p33-36

<sup>5</sup> Donald Davidson, *Mental Events*, 1970



In Borland's piece *Spirit Collection: Hippocrates*, 1999 she has collected 100 leaves and preserved them in glass vials. National Galleries Scotland website's database: "The artist was intrigued by this link with the past, which fitted in with her research into the importance of the family tree in determining medical conditions."



For example in Christine Borland's work *The Velocity of Drops Stairwell -Running, Falling and Rising*, 1995 she uses the language of crime investigation to raise questions about violence.

sheds light on the *mind-body problem*, how our mind communicates with the body. In psychology, mind is considered to be the host of identities: who a person is or the qualities of a person that make them different than others. Depending on the field of science, identity is seen very differently. In philosophy, it is called *sameness*, which refers to the relation each thing bears just to itself. In psychology and social sciences, identity is defined as a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations.

Rather than going deeply into what particles we can categorise from within identity, I suggest another approach: Kantian philosophy asks "What is a person?" Many of the notions concerning the characteristics of the mind from the Ancient history to the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th century were normative and advising. From that point on it started to be more analytic, but still there seemed to be a dream of finding a *truth* of humanity. The post-modern approach is still analytic with social sciences and psychology, but there has been an interesting turn in the field of philosophy: it has quit looking. Kosuth suggests that this turn was made in 20th century already and he describes it as "the end of philosophy and the beginning of art". He claims that this is due to the amount of knowledge science has given us, that there is no need to try to find a truth about anything since there is so much empiric knowledge. People do not need to depend on finding solutions from the rationale because the information already exists. Art, he says, gives the feel of the untouchable information and the knowledge we cannot accomplish by science or philosophy.

According to Heideggerian philosophy, especially within the term *Dasein*<sup>6</sup>, we cannot know what our mind is because we are limited by its existence.

Have we surrendered to these circumstances and agreed that as long as we know enough about the mind and brain to cure illnesses, we don't need to know anything more?

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<sup>6</sup> John Haugeland, Reading Brandom Reading Heidegger, 2005

### 3. MINDSCAPE: HOW DID IT TAKE FORM?

I have been working on a subjective human condition, what it is to be a person, for quite some time. Like so very often in art, the personal angle in a piece speaks on general levels, a very personal story turns into a story to which anyone can relate because it is personal and people have so many mutual experiences. Art makes personal impersonal only so it can be taken personally.

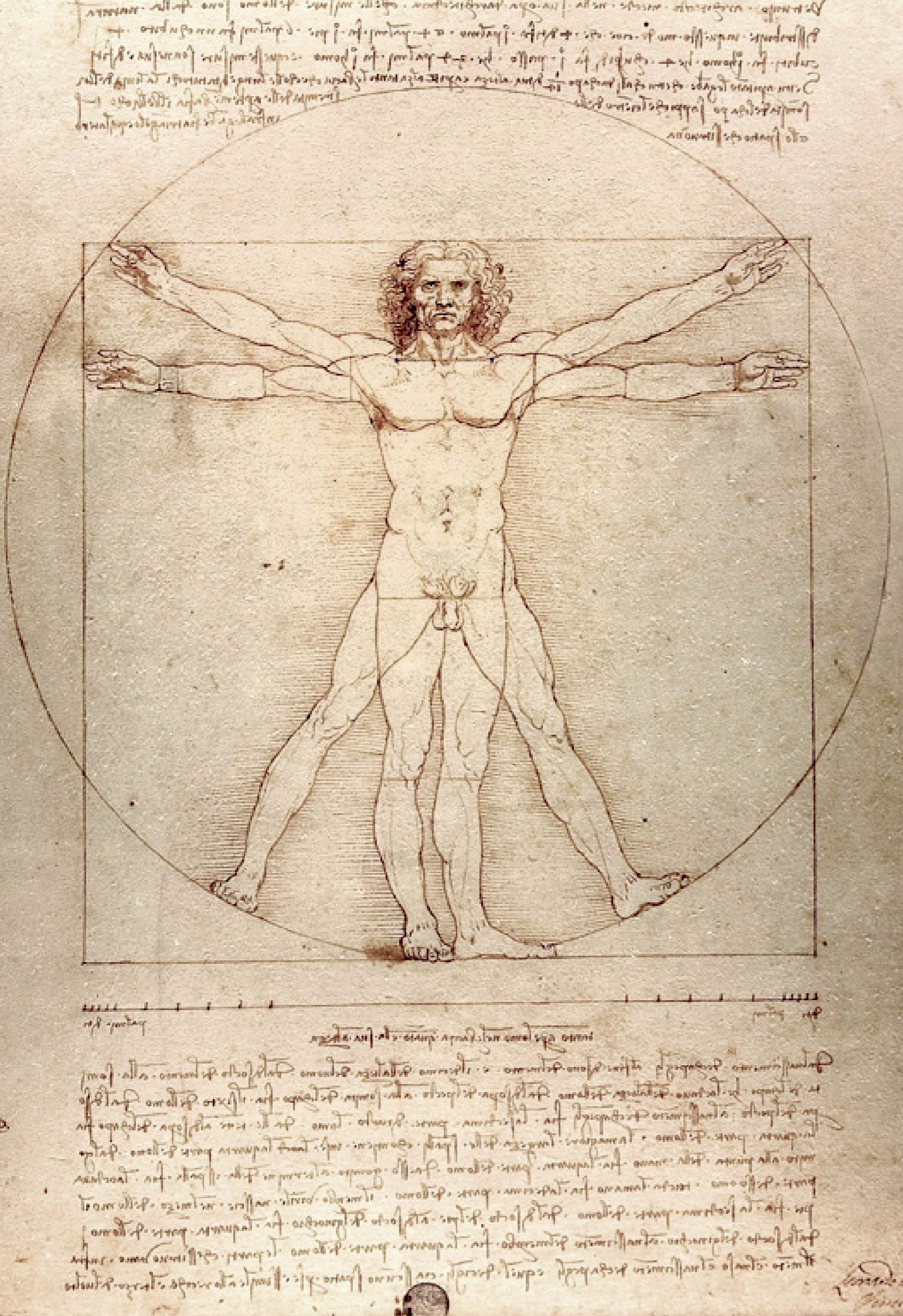
I have been interested in the borders of different aspects of being a person: where is the line between body and mind, an individual and society? Driven by previous thoughts and pieces, I had an urge to make a prototype, a sort of idea about the human mind: how it is formed, how it moves, organizes, and falls apart.

I found the process of making my piece mind wrecking and unbelievably fulfilling. Natural science, philosophy, and psychology where a huge inspiration but also helped me to handle a very versatile and complex entirety.

My goal is to criticize, analyse, and introduce my piece as conceptual art and that is why I find it necessary to also introduce and question my concept: In my previous piece "What would Freud say?" I was studying human mind as a platform of different pieces of identity that we are formed of. The pieces that define us stem from our childhood and our surroundings as we grow up. The fundamental pieces are the same, but their form and position to each other make us individuals. That is when I formed the concept of Mindscape; a micro cosmos within. In my thesis work Mindscape I have done just that.

Mindscape as a term is of my own creation, but the origin of it is very theoretical and explainable. A huge inspiration was **Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man**. It is the prototype of perfect human body and physical state, so could one be made of the human mind? Even though it strictly presents proportions we could argue it to be more: The circle in which the man is





situated in, can be read as a symbol of the universe whereas the square would represent secularity. We can read this as a hint of the idea of human as a micro universe. The quest to find the structure of the mind has been going on for centuries but is still unknown to us, like the dark matter of space.

Plato suggests that behind every being and object there is an idea of the thing itself, a concept. In Cartesian philosophy, the being of a human is dualistic, the mind works together with the body to form a whole, which is a person. Davidson takes this even further and claims that the mind can be divided into pieces, which have been floating in the field of philosophy of mind and psychology. There has been no united opinion on what these building blocks of our being are, so I have not introduced them in my work. I do not find it relevant either; it is the dark unknown matter. I find that their movement is the most interesting factor.

According to Heidegger's *Dasein* we cannot access the function of our mind because our ratio is limited by its existence. By acknowledging this, my work becomes slightly ironic as it is trying to do just that.

These choices of theories have raised my curiosity and inspired me to build a system of my own. The process of selecting them has been an academic adventure but also very intuitional. The pool on the topic of human mind is vast and even with these ideas on my agenda I feel that I am reaching for too much, but this is a matter of my choices as an artist. This would bring us to the topic on what is an artist's responsibility for their work. Since the question of responsibility here is not about ethics, which is a highly complex question, we could argue that by taking responsibility of the meaning of my work, makes the aesthetic choices justified. From conceptual art's point of view, this makes perfect sense. Still I must criticize my concept and choices: from an academic point of view it does not seem that there are enough logical arguments on why I chose to put together these somewhat contradictory theories.

## 4. HOW DOES MINDSCAPE FOLLOW THE TRADITIONS OF CONCEPTUAL ART?



John McCracken, Black Box  
1971



Robert Morris, Box with the sound of its own making  
1961

The form and aesthetics of the piece were purely intuitional driven from the concept of the mind. The cube is a fundamental form in my piece. Its importance can be argued by its fundamental value in geometry, but also as a semiotic mark for building blocks, a constructive element. Kosuth brings up the usage of cubes and boxes in art: "The difference between all the various uses of the box or cube form is directly related to the differences in the intentions of the artists." It seems that in conceptual art you really can justify everything by an a priori idea. For example, in **Robert Morris'** work *Box with the sound of its own making*, Morris presents a wooden box with a three-hour audio of the sounds that came from making that box. This piece arouses conversation about the birth of an art object, which is in relation with art as an a priori idea, but he also holds the box as a concept in itself: it is not just about giving birth to an art object but about giving birth to a box.

In the beginning of my process with Mindscape, I figured that the material of the cubes would be the most important aspects. They would have a conceptual value and speak volumes of the nature of our identity. The original idea was to make every cube from a different material to represent different aspects and fragments of our mind. In the end, none of that felt good. The piece felt clogged and the materials did not seem to reveal any secrets of our being. First stage was to lessen the variety of materials, first to three, two and finally I realised there can only be one material. Since the concept of the mind is so unknown and endless I found it very difficult to find a material that would hold all that. Then I realised that it should not be a material at all, since nothing can compare or explain the complexity of human mind, it should be an absence of material, something that stays unknown, a mystery. At this time the idea of mind as a micro cosmos gave me inspiration to resolve my material problem. The cubes formed into the dark matter, the cosmologic constant, anti-material of sorts. To find a way to represent this I knew I needed a material that does not look like any





The first cubes had multiple materials. This is a resin cube with broken teacups in the making

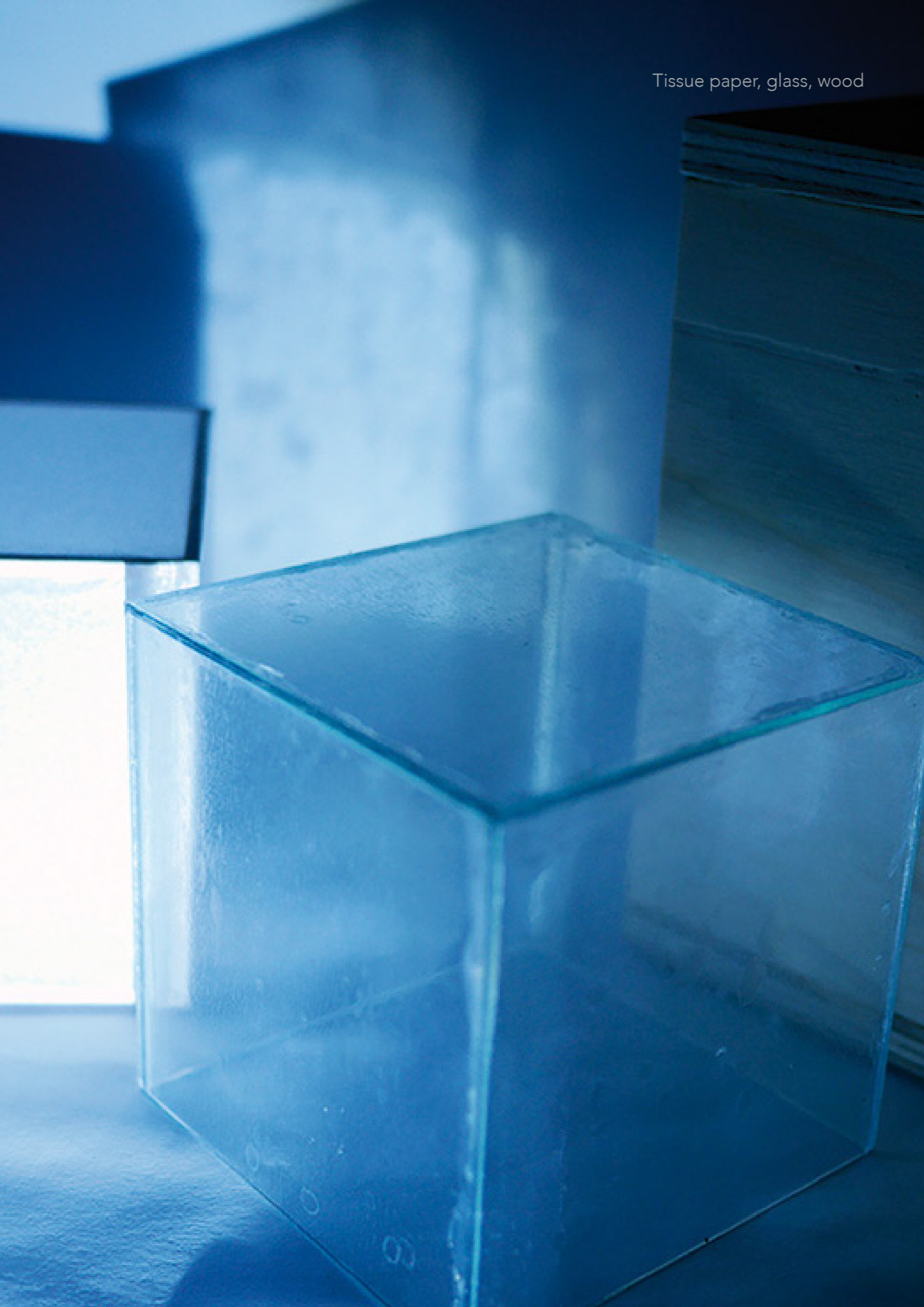
material that people know. I made wooden cubes and covered them with a thick pigment and glue mixture to create a surface, which needed to have a feel of a material without showing what it is actually made of.

In John McCracken's *Black box* we see how he plays with material. The black surface reflects its surroundings, making it seem like a living organism, which lives through the change of the world around it. Just like humans according to many theories in philosophy and psychoanalysis. The surrounding becomes a part of the material creating a substance and a surface that does not look like what it actually is.

The lighting is imperative in *Mindscape*. Thematically it brings the movement, constructing and deconstructing, the feel of pulsating chaos that eases at times. Above all I feel the lights are important for the viewers experience. As I stated earlier, in conceptual art aesthetics should be argued for its function not taste. Light brings a sort of magical feel to this work. At times the strings that hold the cubes seem to vanish and the pieces are just levitating, then they reappear when the lights change. The lights consume the space around the sculpture and the rhythm of the changing lights feels quite organic, almost like the rhythm of breathing or a heartbeat. The shadows change and at times form a shape of a human and the viewer can not really tell how it's happening. The aesthetics aim to give an experience that would arouse almost abstract ideas but above all it aims for the viewer to stop and experience the piece.



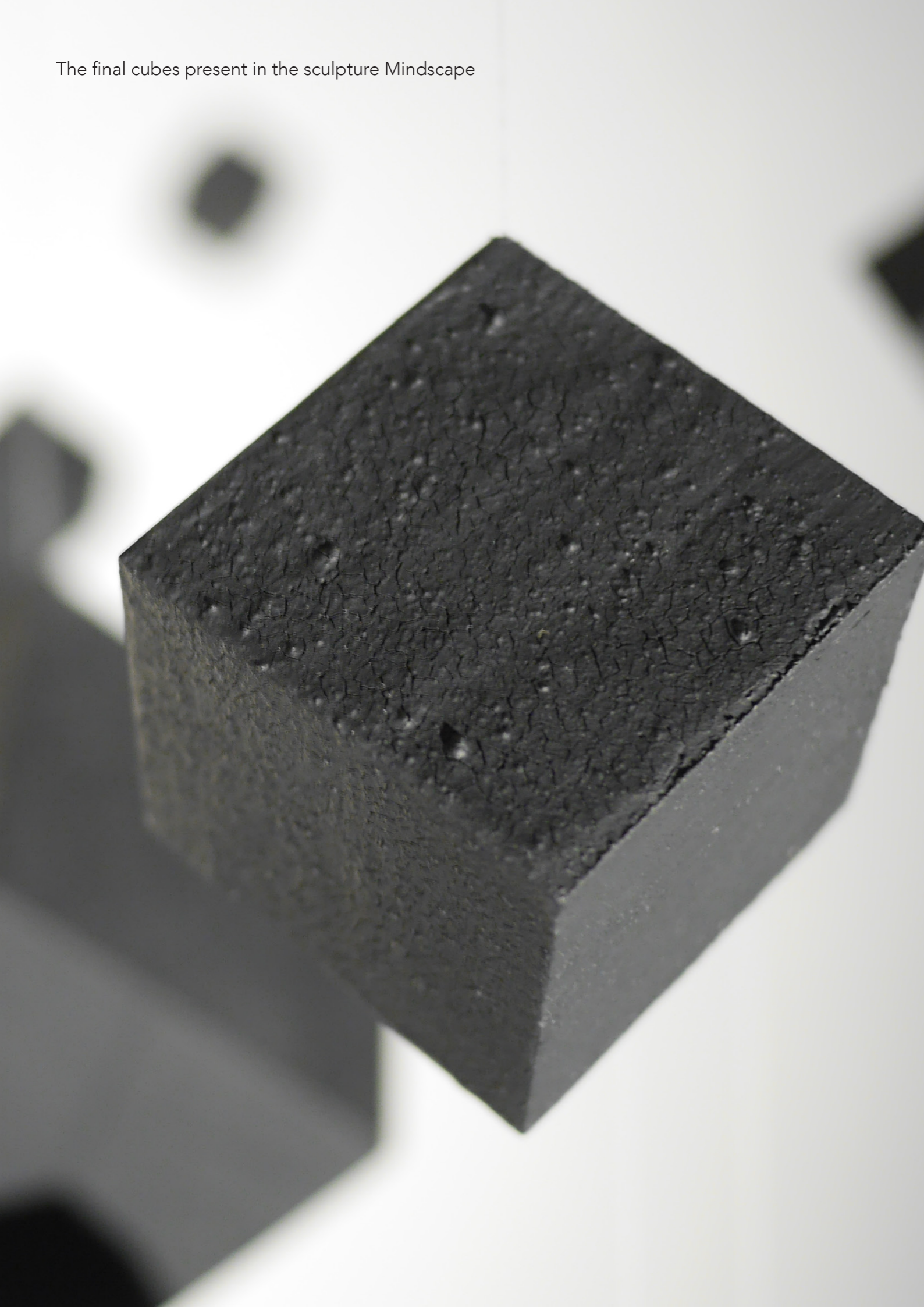
Tissue paper, glass, wood



Wood, coffee, peppers, foil, beans, feathers



The final cubes present in the sculpture Mindscape



## 5. CLOSING

I found some pointers that do justify Mindscape as conceptual art. Now that I think about the process, I would like to add to Sol LeWitt's phrase about the idea becoming a machine that makes the art. I wouldn't call it a machine, but a living organism. The reason why, is that the development and process feel quite irregular and leaves space for chance and intuition. Another reason is that I find that the concept of a piece gets developed and born again with every viewer. If one criterion of conceptual arts aesthetics is the importance of the viewers experience, I would say that ones the work is published the idea changes too. One of the works aims is to arouse an idea, a concept in the viewer, which does not necessarily have anything to do with the artist's idea. In a way, when an artist starts making conceptual art knowingly, they put themselves in a the role of a thinker. Then they transfer this to the viewers, not their thought, but their role as a thinker.

Thus to the conversation of *can anything be art*, which is one of the basic questions of conceptual art, I would say that the responsibility of an artist and a thinker is at the forefront in postmodern conceptualism. Starting from the 60's it was very important to pose the question of what art can be. I am not saying it should not still be done, but to my mind it is not the most important dilemma today. I think that the talent of a conceptual artist and the major goal should be to transmit the need to think. Conceptualism is often criticised about the fine line that exists between art and non-art judging solely by the objects. The counter argument is that the piece itself is not important, but the information gained from the process and the idea behind the visual. Then again, in the mission to arouse thinking I find that the bar is raised fairly high for the imagery. Perhaps an object needs a punch line to be art?

Even more importantly, is that not the aim of most postmodern art? Compared to modernism we must think about the world we live in today. In a world packed with information and stimuli all around us and in virtual reality, image has suffered an inflation. In the whole spectrum of images today, maybe what separates art from "artsy" is the fact that all art is conceptual. Perhaps that is the phenomenon of postmodern art.



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