It was once safe to say, as did Ernest Becker and Otto Rank, that works of art express our human longing for immortality. Our pyramids and museums house art and artifacts created with varying degrees of a consciousness—or hope—that our earthly presence will be known beyond the mortal span of life. Though he is long gone, Van Gogh re-lives each time we engage with one of his immortal paintings.

Recently, The Washington Stage Guild mounted *Inventing Van Gogh* -- a play about “A contemporary young painter...hired to forge a lost painting and then justify his decisions to Vincent himself”. Van Gogh’s iconic severed ear (now thought to be not self inflicted) is dust, but his great paintings and breakthrough art—his very name—lives on.
In addition to art that reflects the longing for an immortal self, we have had important art movements, such as DADA which was a reaction to the destructiveness of WW I, that produced innovative, revolutionary, and lasting art.

We also have unscripted dramas, temporary --Happenings-- performed in theaters, where the audience moves about under some direction, but essentially spontaneously. “Happenings” have also involved a deliberate destruction of artworks as a response to “an era rife with echoes of war”. The Hirschhorn Museum in Washington, DC currently has an exhibit of such events --which includes “a reprisal by the artist Raphael Montanez Ortiz, of his 1966 ‘Piano Destruction Concert’ in which he takes an ax” to the instrument. Reflections on human destructiveness, rather than the immortality of art, is the focus here.

In this exhibit, a further thought on destructiveness--this time in relation to gender-- was evoked by a brief and lyrical silent film made by, and featuring, a beautiful young woman gracefully gliding down a city street carrying aloft what appears to be a very long stemmed flower. As she floats past the closely parked cars, she smashes their windows, one after another, with a flower that packs the punch of a metal rod.
A Police officer is then seen coming slowly down the street. It turns out to be a Police woman, who in turn, smiles at the young woman as she walks past the breakage. She evidences no discomfort or censure whatsoever at the destructiveness.

I wondered if this artist was adding a feminist note and giving clear warning that destructiveness and aggression is not the sole domain of the male. This destroyer was beautiful, feminine, graceful, and packed a mindless aggressive wallop worthy of any tough guy. (I was hoping that more of my colleagues would see this film and check out my take.)

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In yet another twist on the “immortality vs. transience issue”, I think of the very fine and prolific Scottish-British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy. In attempting to create works of art that were intentionally transient, he carefully built beautiful works of earth and stone that he then deliberately subjected to the tidal erosion of the sea and other forces of nature.

Goldsworthy “creates works of art with ice, driftwood, leaves, stone, dirt and snow in open fields, beaches, rivers, creeks and forests. With each new creation, he carefully studies the energetic flow and transitory nature of his work”…. Not co-incidentally, but ironically, this was artistically portrayed in a lyrical documentary film (2003) which captured the fleeting beauty of his work. Goldsworthy’s work may be transient but Netflix lives on.
I found it amusing, and not without poetic justice, that soon after this film on his transient art was made, Goldsworthy was commissioned (2004) by the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC to construct several permanent Domes for an outdoor space on the side of the East Wing of the Museum. They are visible through a large glass wall on the main floor. These igloo-like structures are made of a very durable substance: Buckingham Virginia Slate, not easily, or ever, eroded by the rain to which it is subject. The Domes live on.

Sadly, I am not fond of the cramped glass-enclosed Domes (and have long had trouble with some other parts of the East Wing since its creation early in my move to Washington). I am not sure whether this project reflected Goldsworthy’s own transition from the temporary to the immortal, but perhaps we might paraphrase Freud, who, when asked if his ever-present cigar was his “phallic symbol,” was said to have replied, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar”. For Goldsworthy, perhaps a commission is sometimes just a commission. Artists, as do all of us, have to eat, even if we do not smoke.

Perhaps Goldworthy’s earlier transient art foreshadowed what I call “Flash Art,” i.e. the increasing use of one’s own body for artistic expression--and often subject to change. It made me ask if what I was seeing, and no doubt projecting, was the beginning of a shift in the art spirit from permanence to transience. I also have a bit more data on personal artistic expression that has contributed to my thinking more positively about the current state of the art scene.
A few years ago, I began to notice an increase in self expression through “body art”. Although body art such as the tattoo is very old in human history, I’ve also noticed an increase in other kinds of self applied body Art, such as a wide striking streak of vivid color in one’s hair and very intricate braiding. Some of you may have a good sense of the possible origins of this form of self display.

In my use of the term Flash Art, which to me signifies art that is short-lived, I wondered if I were responding to our rapidly changing times and that our culture, in its Jungian “collective unconscious,” is starting to express the nearness of our ending. Flash Art is temporary and it is only about the self. Say it quickly while you can, for it may not be there for long. A morbid thought.

Perhaps Salvatore Dali’s moustache was an early expression of flash art. He was not morbid. Playful would be more like it. And his moustache was great. I had the extraordinary good luck to see it up close and personal while supping at the Russian Tea Room during my college years. I have always felt drawn to Dali who once asked Freud to comment on his art. To Dali’s disappointment, Freud was reputed to have said, “But, there is no unconscious there”.

I think Dali might have preferred to be experienced as deeply unconscious, if not mysterious. He wouldn’t have much liked my
response either to a very important show of his in the Philadelphia Museum of Art some years ago. Amidst all the paintings, the object that interested me most turned out to be Mrs. Dalí’s beautifully decorated, short-waisted jacket—just my style and just my size. It was on display in its own glass case.

Many Dalí artifacts were on sale in the Museum Shop. I promptly asked about the jacket and was disappointed when I was told that no reproductions of that had been made. To my mind, her jacket was the “Best in Show”, even if it was not the creation of her husband. I have learned to accept my shallowness.

However, I was deeply relieved of the morbid cast of Flash Art and transience through a chance visit to a fine contemporary art gallery in Baltimore in which one painting by a young artist was a rather beautiful, vivid monochromatic red drip painting, on canvas as in the old days. It had a more restrained early Expressionist quality to it. In its abstract way it conveyed great depth and feeling.

I was more than moved when I learned that it was done by a young Japanese artist in response to the deadly explosion of the nuclear plant in his native Fukushima. I was happy to see that this kind of reflective and immortalizing art was still possible for a young contemporary artist. His town is largely gone. His painting—I believe done on his visit home—is with us. His painting evoked the dripping of blood and tears. Thanks to his fine work, memory is served.
Finally

My last piece of data on Transience has to do with my “working through” of comments by strangers about what I am wearing. This has increasingly emerged in recent times, although I have worn some of my clothes for 20, 30 and sometimes 40 years. The clothes are old, the comments are recent. They are from people who do, and do not, seem to express their own artistic affinity. Having had Norman Malcolm, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s pupil as my Philosophy professor, I am drawn to fathoming meaning, and as an analytic psychologist, I am further drawn to understand subjective meaning. At least to try. Why are the comments coming now?

For example, the outfit I have on is a combination of a top and skirt I came across in a little San Francisco shop some 30 years ago and have often worn over the years. The sleeveless vest was made by the gifted weaver Candice Cole about 20 years ago. I cannot wear it without getting positive, appreciative comments. Since the outfit is old and the comments are new, I began to wonder: it is a sign that it was happening because of my vintage? Perhaps women of a certain age don’t dress like this. Perhaps Transience is around the corner.

While that may or may not be true, I had another thought that pleased me more. Since my other study of interest is about the phenomenon of identification I began to link the comments on the way I dress to another aspect of Flash Art beyond Transience.
It may be—and I welcome your discussion of this—that the world is far more cognoscente and appreciative of art. My clothes have been here for a long time but our culture may be increasingly sensitive to—and identifying with—the pleasures of art in many forms. Flash art may not be so much an indication of Transience but a signal that our culture is becoming more appreciative of the creative force of art and the joy of color. If so, that makes me happy. Art is better than War. Ask the Dadaists.

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Another thought on Transience came to me during our conference, and the joyful experience of witnessing one of our colleagues careful, painstaking, superb, creation of a sandpainting. I was fortunate to be able to sit alone in the room with him, while he was working on it. Perhaps a diamond cutter could identify with the painstaking exactitude of the creative process. I was not there, as were many of my colleagues, when its creator removed all the sand he had laboriously constructed. It did make me think however, that what may be transient may also be immortal. Buddhism has taught us that.

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