Non-state of mind

A thesis on the significance of artworks of transcendental and meditative value in the context of Descartes’ rational logic and Rousseau’s criticism of civilization.

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Coming out of the nineteenth century, we have been the inheritors of a scientific materialistic point of view that holds that the way to understand is to divide, to separate, to isolate, to categorize, to specialize.” … “There was a feeling in the air (and in some ways it is still a dominant theme) that, although we’ve reached a high point of understanding through this approach of dividing and analyzing, we now have to put the whole back together.¹

¹ VIOLA, Bill: Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House, Writings 1973-1994: 270
Resumo

O tópico principal desta tese é analisar e discutir a importância de um *estado de mente ausente* no contexto do nosso mundo secularizado e civilizado, tendo como ponto de partida a minha experiência em morar num mundo que parece não fazer qualquer sentido. Um mundo que a cada dia se torna mais complexo e faminto, e cujos habitantes correm continuamente atrás de objectivos intermináveis.

A tese tem um caráter crítico e espiritual, lida com a necessidade de parar para deixar as nossas mentes entrar num *estado de mente ausente* onde seria possível refletir sobre o nosso mundo novamente a partir de um “ground-zero”.

A tese esclarece criticamente o impacto da filosofia de René Descartes sobre a cultura e mentalidade Moderna, e posteriormente aborda a crítica da civilização de Jean Jacques Rousseau segundo a minha própria opinião que existe uma dimensão não-mensurável, profunda e pura na vida. Uma dimensão da qual as pessoas de hoje em dia, de modo geral, se tenham tornado cada vez mais desligadas.

A tese explora o que foi feito artisticamente para religar o homem a este estado profundo e puro do Ser em toda a sua plenitude. Através da análise e discussão de obras de arte produzidas por Bill Viola, Mark Rothko e Edward Hopper, esta tese apresenta artistas que consistentemente têm oferecido alternativas e perspectivas adicionais à visão modernista dominante na Filosofia e na Arte, assim como à fundação profundamente materialista de uma civilização baseada na racionalidade, na divisão, propriedade e comparação.

*Palavras chave*

Unidade, Estado de ausência mental, Serenidade, Espiritualidade, O Vazio.
Abstract

The primary subject of this thesis is to analyze and discuss the importance of a non-state of mind in the context of our secularized and civilized world.

The thesis is of a critical and spiritual character and derives from my experience of living in a stressful world that does not seem to make sense. To change our world into a more harmonious place it is my belief that it is necessary to allow our minds to enter into nothingness, into non-states of minds from which it is possible to reflect upon our world anew from a “ground-zero.”

The thesis critically aims to clarify the origins of our present state of world, and analyzes initially the radical impact of René Descartes’ philosophy on modern culture and mentality. Subsequently it takes departure in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s criticism of civilization and in my own belief that there exists an un-measurable, deep and pure dimension in life. A dimension that today’s people in general have become increasingly disconnected from.

The thesis explores what has been done artistically to reconnect man to this profound state of pure being, of being in its essence. By analyzing and discussing artworks by Bill Viola, Mark Rothko and Edward Hopper the essay presents artists who thoroughly and consistently have offered alternatives and additional perspectives to the dominant modernist vision in philosophy and art, and to the one-sided materialistic foundation of our civilization based on rationality, division, property and comparison.

Keywords
Oneness, mental absence, serenity, spirituality, emptiness.
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1. Introduction

Our mind is capable of passing beyond the dividing line we have drawn for it. Beyond the pairs of opposites of which the world consists, other, new insights begin.²

The aim of the thesis is to investigate on the importance of a non-state of mind in the context of our secularized, civilized and advanced world. A non-state of mind is a highly undervalued and neglected state in our modern societies, however in this thesis it is considered not only a valuable condition in itself but also an important means that can enable people to reflect anew (from a mental “ground-zero”) upon their relationship to the world.

I define a non-state of mind as a serene mental state of emptiness or complete absence - a state of mind liberated from all mental occupations such as thoughts, guilt, worries, memories etc. The term can be compared to a state of pure being in the way animals must experience it, where one’s self or ego is not distracting the experience of life in its purity, so that a deeper, serene, more unified level or state of reality may be perceived. I consider the term as a fundamental and positive yet unrecognized part of modern human nature, a condition eloquently described by Rousseau:

The sense of existence, stripped of every other affection, is of itself a precious feeling of contentment and peace, which alone would suffice to render this existence lovely and sweet, to him who knows to remove from his mind all those terrestrial and sensual impressions which incessantly arise to distract and to trouble our comfort here below.³

The theme of the thesis originates in the chaotic state of today’s world, and in my experience of being part of a world that does not make sense. Everyday our world is getting more and more complex and exploited, and everyday people seem to hasten their continuous chase after never-ending goals.

It is my belief that the external world is a reflection of the inner state of its inhabitants, and that the chaotic state of our world is an indication of peoples’ lack

² HESSE Hermann: Inside and Outside: 171
³ ROUSSEAU, Jean Jaques: The Reveries of a Solitary Walker: fifth walk, 221
of a sufficiently pure connection to their inner worlds and to a profound awareness of the nature of life.

As an art student I find it interesting and important to investigate on how art can serve to communicate a spiritual state of life that enables the audience to sense an inner state of pure being, and enables them to sense a universal wholeness. I believe this inner and pure dimension is a universal and natural part of human nature and that without being connected to it, man is not able to properly sense himself or the universe; and consequently not capable of creating a healthy and harmonious relationship to the world.

The thesis is divided into 5 sections, the first being the Introduction and the last the End conclusion. In section 2 the thesis critically aims to clarify the origins of our present state of world, and presents the theoretical foundation of the thesis. The first chapter is dedicated to the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650). His radical impact on Western culture and mentality offers a theoretical and important explanation of the motivation behind my choice of theme, and I will in this section extract essential matters from his two written works *Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637) and his *Meditations of First philosophy* (1641). The next chapter originates in the French philosopher, Jean Jaques Rousseau’s (1712-1778) critical standpoints towards civilization. I focus particularly on his theories about how the progress of civilization has moved man away from his real nature. The chapter departs in his two discourses: *Discourse on The Origin and the Foundations of inequality Among Men* (1754) and *Discourse on the Sciences and Art* (1750). Rousseau is in my opinion rather one-sided in his explanations of the regress of humanity, however, I consider his viewpoints relevant and of continuous value in relation to my theme and to a critical perception of our present state of world. The theoretical section is concluded by a discussion of my concept non-state of mind when viewed in the context of Descartes’ rational logic and Rousseau’s criticism of civilization, not least his disapproval of reason.

In section 3 I include and analyze artworks by three different artists who I find interesting because of their artistic achievements and aspirations of

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4 I will use this abbreviation of the title: *Discourse on the Method* during the thesis.
communicating a profound and universal state of life through their works. I analyze two videos by Bill Viola, one being a video installation, the other a video performance: *Room for st. John of the Cross* (1983) and *The Reflecting Pool* (1979). Subsequent I analyze three paintings by Edward Hopper: *Office in a small town* (1953), *Quartos à Beira do Mar* (1951) and *Four lane Road* (1956), and eventually I analyze *The Rothko Chapel* by Mark Rothko.

After the analysis I discuss the analyzed artworks in the context of Descartes’ impact on Modern culture and Rousseau’s precursory warnings against a one-sided rational development of our civilization. I discuss the significance of the artworks’ transcendental and meditative value, and I examine the artists’ various means of communicating profound meditative and pure states of minds. I eventually compare and evaluate their attempts of engaging and touching something deep within the viewer.

In the ensuing section 4 I present and discuss my own artworks and explain about their intentions, progress and relation to the analyzed and discussed themes and artists of the thesis. My artworks consist of photographs, paintings and sculptures. The photographs show people after they have been meditating for at least one hour, while my paintings are elaborations on these photographs and aim to capture the photographed people’s meditative states of minds. Initially I intended to portray the photographed people realistically while focusing on their meditative states, next I decided to work purely from their meditative states of minds and their effects, and express these in a more creative painterly manner. In addition to the photographs and paintings I have created an installation of twelve small meditating sculptures (a work in progress).
2. Descartes’ rational logic and Rousseau’s criticism of civilization

I recognized that I was a substance whose essence or nature is only thinking.\textsuperscript{5}

2.1 Descartes’ rational logic

2.1.1 Rene Descartes in an introductory context

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is a French philosopher and mathematician whose thoughts on the sciences of math, nature and humanity have influenced Western philosophy and culture so fundamentally that he is generally recognized as the “Father of Modern Philosophy” and as the founder of modern skepticism. In this thesis I have chosen to focus on his two texts *Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637) and his *Meditations on First philosophy* (1641). These two written works comprise Descartes’ most well known and influential thoughts. Where the first text is mainly known for his groundbreaking method of investigating knowledge, the second text is a more thorough exploration of the philosophical foundation for his new approach to knowledge. Due to lack of space the following analysis will predominantly have its starting point in Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method*.

2.1.2. Descartes’ method of correct reasoning

Descartes initiates his *Meditations on First philosophy* by critically disapproving of his contemporaries for being: “[…] clearly persuaded more by custom and example than by any certain knowledge”\textsuperscript{6} and he denounces in particular his contemporary philosophers for combatting each other in a continuous search after prestige rather than the truth.\textsuperscript{7} In a likewise manner his *Discourse on the Method* commences by a critical standpoint towards the prevailing educational system which he finds has clouded and confused his mind.

Descartes states that every human being is born with reason and has a rational soul; and he argues that man’s inborn reason is pure and perfect: "it is almost impossible that our judgments are as pure and solid as they would have been

\textsuperscript{5} DESCARTES, Rene - *Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences*: Part four.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.: Part two
\textsuperscript{7} DESCARTES, Rene: *Meditations on First Philosophy*: To the most wise and illustrious, the dean and doctors of the sacred faculty of theology in Paris.
if we had had the total use of our reason from the moment of our birth and had never been led by anything but our reason. However by growing up, socialising and becoming educated, man’s reason is corrupted, and his ability to think correctly is distorted.

To counteract this tendency and to help man return to his originally solid and pure reason, Descartes considers it necessary to establish a certain and permanent structure in the sciences that can provide knowledge of indubitable character.

In order to attain this aim, Descartes invents his own “method for rightly conducting one’s reason.” This method requires of him to initially seek refuge from the exterior world, discard all former knowledge and meditate in silence while listening exclusively to his reason. His starting point is an epistemological ground-zero as he finds it necessary to “[…] seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation…” By applying this new method, Descartes rationally deduces four basic standards on how to reason and find absolute certainty: (1) to only search truth in what is evident and what you can prove yourself, (2) to divide all problems in as small parts as possible, (3) to proceed from the most simple to the most difficult, (4) to constantly create a chain of reasoning and always be aware of where you are in the process.

Descartes’s method has as its main point to reject as false all ideas that can be doubted and next to establish a fundamental set of principles of indubitable knowledge from which only certain knowledge can be generated. His method was based on a methodological skepticism which confronted the prevailing philosophy of his time rooted in the Aristotelian presumption that all knowledge comes from the senses. Descartes had observed that the senses can be deceptive and mentions as examples how objects at a distance appear to be quite small and how dreams can appear as authentic as real life. From these observations Descartes deduced never

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8 DESCARTES, Rene: Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences: Part two
9 DESCARTES, Rene: Meditations on First Philosophy, First meditation.
11 “All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.” (DESCARTES, Rene: Meditations on First Philosophy, First meditation)
“to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.”, and he concludes that: “whether we are awake or asleep, we should never allow ourselves to be persuaded except by the evidence of our reason”\textsuperscript{12}, […] “neither our imagination nor our senses can assure us of anything unless our understanding intercedes.”\textsuperscript{13}

Descartes believes that searching for truth is the most meaningful, useful and satisfying occupation in life and he considers pure reason and a mathematical logic the best tools in this regard. He is therefore fully content with his method which departs from these two elements and he is determined to: “using all my life to cultivate my reason and to progress as far as I could in a knowledge of the truth, following the method which I had prescribed for myself.”\textsuperscript{14} Initially Descartes applies his mechanistic method to algebraic problems, later he extends it to the sciences of biology, humanity, psychology and religion: “Because I had not restricted this method to one matter in particular, I was hopeful that I could apply it just as usefully to difficulties in other sciences as I had applied it to those in algebra.”\textsuperscript{15}

2.1.3. Cogito ergo sum and further deductions from Descartes’ logical reasoning

During his meditations Descartes deduces that “[…] in the very act of thinking about doubting the truth of other things, it very clearly and certainly followed that I existed”\textsuperscript{16} Descartes does not refuse that he perceives his body through the use of the senses, however, as he regards the senses as unreliable he concludes that the only indubitable knowledge he can have about himself is that he is a thinking thing. This reasoning made him reach his famous conclusion that one exists because one thinks: “[…] I recognized that I was a substance whose essence or nature is only thinking.”\textsuperscript{17} “Noticing that this truth – I think; therefore I am – was so firm and so sure that […] I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the

\textsuperscript{12} DESCARTES, Rene - Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences: Part four.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.: Part four.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.: Part three.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.: Part two.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.: Part four.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.: Part four.
philosophy I was looking for.”\textsuperscript{18} Descartes underlines this conclusion by stating that, “[…] from the fact that I know no other thing which pertains to my essence, it follows that there is no other thing which really does belong to it.”\textsuperscript{19}

However because of his doubtful character Descartes regards himself as imperfect, and he reasons that our ideas cannot all be true, because we are not completely perfect. His ability to comprehend of perfection assures him that something perfect must exist outside of him: “from the sole fact that I have in myself the idea of a thing more perfect than myself, it follows that this thing truly exists.”\textsuperscript{20} He reasons that the self exists because it thinks and that God exists because the self is imperfect and there must be a source for the idea of perfection outside the self:

But if we did not know that everything real and true within us comes from a perfect and infinite being, then no matter how clear and distinct our ideas were, we would not have a single reason to assure us that they had the perfection of being true.\textsuperscript{21}

Following Descartes’ argument “it is just as certain that God, this perfect being, is or exists as any geometric proof can be.”\textsuperscript{22} He argues that the idea of God is innate and placed in us by God, yet “people have difficulties in understanding this and even knowing what their soul is, as well […] (because) they never raise their minds above matters of sense experience…”\textsuperscript{23} It requires logical reasoning to understand God’s existence and to perceive of “our minds as things which are finite and limited, and God as a Being who is incomprehensible and infinite.”\textsuperscript{24}

From this conclusion Descartes proceeds to assert that the mind and the body are two opposite entities that should be understood as separate. He perceives of the mind as the soul that defines ones individuality: “this ‘I,’ that is to say, the

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.: Part four. \\
\textsuperscript{19} DESCARTES, Rene: Meditations on First Philosophy: Preface to the Reader. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.: Preface to the Reader. \\
\textsuperscript{21} DESCARTES, Rene - Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences: Part four. \\
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.: Part four. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.: Part four. \\
\textsuperscript{24} DESCARTES, Rene: Meditations on First Philosophy: Preface to the Reader.
soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body.”25 Descartes
understands the body as an entity with complete opposite character traits than the
mind. Whereas he defines the mind as a non-extended immaterial entity, he defines
the body as an extended material thing that cannot include the features of the mind,
as these cannot be extended physically. Similarly he reasons that the soul does not
contain modes of shape or motion, since these do not belong to the nature of
immateriality. Because of the opposite features of the two entities Descartes has no
doubt that “[…] those things which we conceive clearly and distinctly as being
diverse substances, as we regard mind and body to be, are really substances
especially distinct from the other.”26

According to Descartes’s logic it is only human beings who are endowed
with an immaterial mind or soul, and it is precisely this mind or soul that makes a
body truly human and distinguishes humans from animals.27 Animals are considered
inferior beings due to their lack of a mind/soul, a lack that eradicates their ability to
think or behave rationally, and to even sense hunger, thirst or pain. Following
Descartes’ reasoning animals’ actions and senses are solely mechanical reactions to
external stimuli,28 and their lack of language: “attests not merely to the fact that
animals have less reason than men, but to the fact that they have none at all.”29

To possess mental capacities is however not sufficient per se; what is more
important according to Descartes is to apply these well and to follow his correct
method of reasoning.30 When following this method, he believes it possible to
elevate the average mind of people - and eventually to “make ourselves, as it were,
the masters and possessors of nature.”31 This ability should be pursued, not in
relation to materialistic matters but to preserve our health – or rather to improve the
human mind as it depends on the condition of the organs of the body as he states. In
order to improve humanity Descartes is of the opinion that: “if it is possible to find

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25 DESCARTES, Rene - Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the
Sciences: Part four.
26 DESCARTES, Rene: Meditations on First Philosophy: Preface to the Reader.
27 As he states: “As far as reason, or sense is concerned, (given that) it is the only thing which makes
us human and distinguishes us from the animals (…)” (DESCARTES, Rene - Discourse on the
Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences: Part one)
28 DESCARTES, Rene - Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the
Sciences: Part five.
29 Ibid.: Part five.
30 Ibid.: Part one.
31 Ibid.: Part five.
some means to make human beings generally wiser and more skillful than they have been up to this point, I believe we must seek that in medicine.”

2.1.4 Chapter conclusion
Descartes was guided by an “[...] extreme desire to learn to distinguish the true from the false”, a desire which made him the first to question how we can claim to know anything with certainty about the world. In his two famous works *Discourse on the Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* it is demonstrated how he searches for an absolute truth by virtue of a purely rational method. A method that is built up by a fundamental set of principles based on an algebraic logic of reasoning and which he assures can guarantee absolute knowledge on the world: on nature, human beings and God. By applying this mathematic method Descartes splits up the human world in order to understand, systematize and improve it. Humans are divided from animals and separated from God, our minds are perceived as divided from our bodies and all scientific problems are advised to be divided and researched upon in as small parts as possible. The emphasis is on the importance of humans to continuously improve their mental capacities and advance in order to ‘master’ the world and make it beneficial to our needs. Medicine is viewed as an important factor in this pursuit, which goes along with his rational understanding of the world as operating on mechanical principles. The most revolutionary elements in Descartes’ reasoning are his idea of human reason as the basis of all knowledge and his perception of the human being as a being who exists solely because he thinks. These two factors changed the authority of knowledge from God to humanity, and initiated the basis for modernity.

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32 *Ibid.*: Part five.
33 *Ibid.*: Part one.
2. Rousseau’s criticism of civilization

2.1 Jean Jacques Rousseau in an introductory context

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was the preliminary Romantic critic of civilization, and in his two discourses: *Discourse on The Origin and the Foundations of inequality Among Men* (1754) and *Discourse on the Sciences and Art* (1750) he describes how the civilization process has moved man away from his real nature and from a simple and happier lifestyle. Rousseau’s viewpoints are radical and were in contrast to Descartes’s philosophy not well received by his contemporaries. Despite his fame for his thoughts and talents he ended up poor and fleeing from country to country. This was most likely due to his provocative critic of his contemporaries, not least his colleagues and the politicians. His magnum opus *The Social Contract* caused him not surprisingly a direct conflict with the Government of France; its opening line says: ‘Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.’

2.2 Man’s natural state

Following Rousseau’s line of thought, as demonstrated in his discourse on inequality, there exists an optimal period in the development of humankind. He characterizes it as a period of *absolute good* that was related to a life in accordance with nature’s rhythm, before civilization took place.

As he describes, it was a state in between animality and humanity, where people lived like ‘savages’: “nothing is as gentle as he in his primitive state when, placed by Nature at equal distance from the stupidity of the brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man.” In this state of nature Rousseau characterizes people as free and honest as well as comprising a natural inborn compassion. Although the savages’ moral was rustic it was natural and made it easy to know one another. “The savage lives within himself,” as Rousseau describes. His soul is innocent, aware of only its present existence, without any idea of the future, hardly the end of

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34 STOKES, Philip: *Philosophy, 100 essential thinkers*: 90
35 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jaques: *The Social Contract*: 14
36 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - *Discourse on The Origin and the Foundations of inequality Among Men*: 166
37 Ibid.: 167
38 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - *Discourse on the Sciences and Art*: 7-8
39 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - *Discourse on The Origin and the Foundations of inequality Among Men*: 187
the day.\textsuperscript{40} He wants to feel nothing but repose and freedom, to live and to remain idle.\textsuperscript{41}

In this natural state everyone was independent and equal, each managing his own life, which made the savage man strong and physically healthy.\textsuperscript{42} To survive, he was obliged to do bodily exercise, he had to become agile, run fast, and fight vigorously.\textsuperscript{43} However when he had dined, he would be at peace with all nature, and the friend of everyone. According to Rousseau this natural state of mankind “must have been the happiest and most lasting epoch.”\textsuperscript{44}

2.3 The civilization process and humanity’s regression

Rousseau is of the opinion that the ills of modern society are caused by human beings’ evolution away from their natural state towards civil society.\textsuperscript{45} In his discourse on inequality Rousseau states: “In following the history of civil society, we shall be telling also that of human sickness.”\textsuperscript{46} He exemplifies human sickness by the great inequality in the modern manner of living: the laziness of some in contrast to the overload of work for others, the excess of good food for the wealthy, and, on the other hand, the unhealthy and scarce food for the poor. He denounces civil society for its constant stimulation, excitement and easy satisfaction of people’s senses, and for causing pain, anxiety and mental exhaustion rather than peace and happiness.\textsuperscript{47}

In the opinion of Rousseau, the regression of the human condition began by the introduction of private property, when people stopped inhabiting caves randomly and started building their own huts and creating individual families:\textsuperscript{48} “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying This is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.: 18
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.: 187
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.: 170-171
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.: 161
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.: 167
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.: 138
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.: 138
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.: 137-138
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.: 164
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.: 161
Gradually as people grew increasingly enlightened they also became industrious - initiating agriculture, metallurgy and the division of labour to flourish. In this new condition, man’s needs were initially still scarce and his life simple. He had invented tools to make his life easier and with this extra amount of time he began inventing conveniences and devices that had never before been necessary or thought of.\textsuperscript{50} These new inventions are in Rousseau’s opinion a cause of nothing but suffering and harm, not least to the future generations. He sees the new creations as tapping energy from man’s body and mind - and nevertheless, ending up turning into real needs, making man accustomed and addicted to them, and not wanting to lose them.\textsuperscript{51} The absurd paradox of the civilized man is according to Rousseau that the less natural and necessary his desires are, the more eager he is and the more efforts he uses to satisfy them. The end result is that the man in the state of society is forever active and never enjoys a moment’s relaxation.

Another simultaneous and interdependent factor due to the increasing leisure time was more time for social gatherings; this provoked a psychological transformation where people began to add value to public recognition and to value themselves through the eyes of others. Rousseau considers this mentality change a main cause for inequality and vice, vanity, contempt, shame and envy, all factors fatal to innocence and happiness.\textsuperscript{52} Gradually as man grows civilized, Rousseau sees him becoming increasingly dependent on the opinion of others and ending up loosing his own integrity and authenticity.\textsuperscript{53} Instead of \textit{being} he ends up merely \textit{appearing}, a change that is an directly reflected in society:

When everything is reduced to appearances, everything becomes fake and play-acting: honor, friendship, virtue and often vices. We are asking others what we are, without ever daring to ask it of ourselves. In the midst of so much Philosophy, humanity, politeness, and Sublime maxims, we have nothing more than a deceiving and shallow exterior, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness.\textsuperscript{54}

Rousseau perceives man’s evolution towards civilization as creating nothing but deceit, competition and rivalry, as well as dependency on one another, economic

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.: 164
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.: 164-165
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.: 166
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.: 170
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.: 187
inequality, conflict and injustice.\textsuperscript{55} The growing inequality and conflict in society, made the rich institute rules of justice and peace, and they build political institutions that established the foundations for society and law. These foundations were however not rooted in natural compassion, justice and equality; on the contrary they made the poor people surrender their liberties to the rich, and they legalized property and inequality as basic elements of society.\textsuperscript{56} Before men were free and independent, now everyone had become a slave to a greater or lesser extend. If wealthy they needed services of the poor; if poor, they needed support from the rich; no one was however questioning the situation:\textsuperscript{57} “The most powerful or the most miserable considered their might or misery as a kind of right, both in relation to property and possession of others.”\textsuperscript{58} This societal way of living in slavery is according to Rousseau causing man to grow weak, timid and servile, and draining him from his natural strength and courage.\textsuperscript{59} That this is not how man is in his original state, but how he has become by the spirit of society, is what Rousseau aims at demonstrating in his discourse on inequality.\textsuperscript{60}

2.4 The malevolence of arts and sciences
In the \textit{Discourse on the Arts and Sciences} Rousseau asserts that the arts and sciences have corrupted people’s minds proportional to their improvement. Rather than having been beneficial to humanity, they have depraved our morals, made virtue disappear and added nothing to our real happiness.\textsuperscript{61} The fault is according to Rousseau that the current art and sciences have arisen as a result of pride and vanity and not of authentic human needs. In his opinion, virtue, art, science and authority can only come to their right when they are motivated by a united goal of creating happiness to humankind.\textsuperscript{62}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}: 171  \\
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}: 173  \\
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}: 170-171  \\
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}: 171  \\
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.}: 138  \\
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ibid.}: 187-188  \\
\textsuperscript{61} ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - \textit{Discourse on the Sciences and Art}: 26  \\
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}: 27
\end{flushright}
Rousseau attacks particularly the educational system for not valuing or teaching about virtue, duty, honesty and courage.\textsuperscript{63} Rather than putting emphasis on good actions and the importance of ordinary citizens’ fulfillment of their duties, what is solely appraised is whether you are clever or can become recognized. Rousseau exemplifies: “We have physicists, geometers, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, and painters in plenty; but we have no longer a citizen among us; or if there is, he lives unnoticed and neglected.”\textsuperscript{64} Rousseau finds it demoralizing that “(t)here are thousand prizes for fine discourses, and none for good actions.”\textsuperscript{65}

In Rousseau’s opinion the societal and educational logic adorns people’s minds and perverts their judgment. It causes everyone to think in a uniform and immoral way, as if all minds had “been cast in the same mold.” This applies for everyone, the philosophers, politicians, scientists, artists etc. who according to Rousseau blindly follow the public recognized norms and not themselves. The problem is that they all wish most of all to become admired during their lifetimes, and so compromise their talents to adapt to the common and popular denominator of his century.\textsuperscript{66}

Rousseau laments especially how every artist wishes to be applauded and gain his contemporaries’ admiration. To Rousseau artworks are only valuable when they origin purely in the artist’s soul and authenticity, only then can they have eternal and universal value.

The politicians he condemns for speaking of only commerce and money and to reduce man to be worth no more than the amount he consumes.\textsuperscript{67} He worries what is to become of morals and virtue, “when one has to get rich at all costs”\textsuperscript{68}, and when the philosophers are simultaneously working to destroy and devalue all that is sacred, the foundations of faith and the presence of virtue.\textsuperscript{69}

To improve this destructive state of society, Rousseau finds is necessary that everyone begins to acknowledge that the state of society is not man’s natural state. People have to realize that the people who claim to know the truth or to be wise are not more righteous than others. He refers to Socrates’ statement that although they

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.: 22
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.: 24
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.: 23
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.: 19
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.: 18
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.: 18
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.: 18
all think they know something, “(n)one of us, neither the sophists, nor the orators, nor the artists, nor I, know what is the nature of the true, the good or the beautiful.”

Rousseau advises everyone to counteract the prevailing societal conscience by commencing cultivating virtue in themselves (and civic morality and duty). He recommends people to look more within themselves, and away from the ruling values and dominant way of thinking:

Why should we build our happiness on the opinions of others, when we can find it in our own hearts? [...] Virtue. Are so many efforts and so much equipment really required to know you? Are not your principles engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough in order to learn your Laws to return to oneself and to listen to the voice of one’s conscience in the silence of the passions?

2.5 Chapter conclusion
In contrast to the optimistic view of other Enlightenment figures, Rousseau considers the progress of civilization as having been overall harmful to the well-being of humanity. He describes how man was free, independent and healthy before civilization took place, and how civilization has destroyed man’s natural inclinations, his authenticity and integrity. In the ‘state of society’ inequality and property become permanent and legalized, and a harmful educational logic takes over and distorts people’s minds. People consequently compete and compare themselves with each other. They lose their virtue and their own judgment, and begin to suffer from anxiety, mental exhaustion and overstimulation. The only way for modern man to solve his self-created diseases is according to Rousseau to begin to look inwards. He must distance himself from the ruling societal values, cultivate virtue and dignity from within and get re-connected to his natural state. Only by doing so he will be able to create true value for himself and society, a value based on his authentic human needs rather than pride and vanity.

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70 Ibid.: 12
71 Ibid.: 27
3. A discussion of a non-state of mind in the context of Descartes’ rational logic and Rousseau’s civilization critic.

In the introductory section I introduced the concept non-state of mind, which I defined as a state of mental emptiness and serenity, absent from any mental occupation. In concordance with my belief I chose to concentrate the thesis on this concept, partly because I consider the concept an important medium in order to become connected to life in its essence, partly to counteract the principal role that rational reasoning has on our culture and our lives.

The idea of a non-state of mind is extreme in its association with mental disappearance and as it puts emphasis on the importance of existence before mental activity. I do not however consider mental activity insignificant, yet I find that the rational part of our human and mental capacity is playing a too dominant factor in our lifes and in our understanding of the world. And it is my opinion that our lifes could benefit from being complemented with its complete opponent, mental emptiness.

Only after I started researching theoretically on this subject I realized the many resemblances between Rousseau’s philosophy and the theme and aim of my thesis. Rousseau’s project is to reconnect man to his natural state and recover his original integrity, simplicity, and virtue. He defines this natural state of man as man’s ideal state in which man has no self-awareness and no sense of consciousness. Like an animal he lives in peace and in contentment, merely existing in the present moment without future worries and possessions to attain. In line with my point of view Rousseau finds that man in his aims of rationally understanding and controlling life, has moved himself away from his human nature and forgotten the basic question of what it is to exist, of what being itself is. Rousseau’s advice for modern man is to regress or rather progress backwards towards his original state by commencing to reconnect to himself inwardly, discard of his reason and abandon the ruling societal values and dominant way of thinking. In a likewise manner my concept non-state of mind is meant as a means to become unified with a profound state of existence, which is disconnected from one’s mind and surroundings, and which makes it possible to reflect on life with a refreshed view.
Similar to Rousseau, Descartes has an awareness of an ideal and pure state of humanity that he believes his contemporaries have become disconnected from. And equivalent to Rousseau, his aim is to reconnect man to this state. However, Descartes’ writings on the importance of meditation, of man’s natural state, and of discarding all knowledge taught by others, are based on a philosophy which in its essence is contradictory to the aim of this thesis and to my concept *non-state of mind*. In spite of the fact that Descartes proclaims that his philosophical starting point is based on an epistemological ground-zero, it has as its presumption that every human being is born with reason and has a rational soul, and that human reason in its purity is man’s natural and ideal state.

On account of Descartes’ faith in the superiority of human reason and in reason as the essential human element, he believes that human reason should be the basis of all knowledge. His invention of his mechanistic method of “rightly conducting one’s reason” is correspondingly meant as a guide and a help for his contemporaries to liberate themselves from false ideas and restore their inborn and pure reason. In Descartes’ opinion pure reason and the cultivation of this inborn reason are the fundamental keys to generating personal happiness as well as benefits for humanity and society as a whole. Reason is not only what defines us as human beings, it provides us with the ability to think, separates us from animals and transforms us into superior beings with the ability to become a ‘master and possessor of nature.’

The idea of a *non-state of mind* confronts Descartes’ philosophy in its essence. Similar to Rousseau’s philosophy it has as its starting point that reason in itself is no good and leads to no good. Rousseau saw a great dehumanizing danger in the ongoing one-sided rational development of his time, and stated that human reason, when not accompanied by the heart, could act only in an insensitive and unproductive way. As he wrote: “I have never found that so much science ever contributed to the happiness of my life.” His radical critic of civilization and reason can be interpreted as an indirect critic of Descartes’ philosophy and its success:

72 VAUGHAN, William - *Romanticism and Art*: 18
73 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*: 7th walk, 251
These turns of genius, which draw every thing to our own material interest, which are every where finding out profit or cures, and which would cause all Nature to be looked on with indifference, were we always in health, were never mine.  

Rousseau was against the prevailing faith in the superiority of reason inasmuch as he experienced it creating a society and a humanity based on a rational non-human logic and a superficial, artificial consciousness. In opposition to Descartes, Rousseau does not consider reason as neither inborn nor a necessity in order to exist. On the contrary he states that the current dominant role of reason has distorted the genuine, original human nature, and that natural man was ideal precisely because of his lack of reason. In concordance with the idea of a non-state of mind, Rousseau was of the opinion that man when not being dominated by his reason and mind, is able to connect to his whole being and natural sentiments, and live a life in harmony with nature, God, and other human beings.

Both Descartes and Rousseau believe in the existence of God, however where Descartes’ philosophy prenecessitates rational reasoning in order to acknowledge His existence, Rousseau’s philosophy requires intuition. In line with my belief in the existence of a pure and profound spiritual dimension in life, it is Rousseau’s opinion that the world is governed by a “wise and powerful Will” which he believes is directed by God’s supreme intelligence. Rousseau intuitively senses God or this supreme intelligence within him and around him, however if he tries to rationally understand its existence, it disappears. Especially by walking in nature away from the human created civilization, and by letting go of his mind, Rousseau finds it possible to get connected to God, to expand his soul and sense a pure feeling of existence and “unity of all things”.

This belief of Rousseau and his experience of the current development of civilization made him conclude that all the ills of modern society are caused by human beings’ evolution away from their natural state towards civil society, an evolution that made him state that: “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.” The development made him urge a radical need of

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74 Ibid.: 7th walk, 246
75 In Descartes’ terms Rousseau would be characterized as a weak mind for believing that man and animals were at one point similar - and especially for proclaiming that natural man, with no sense of reason, is superior to modern man.
76 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jaques: *Emile*: Book IV, 272-273
77 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*: 7th walk, 247
78 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jaques: *Emile*: Book 1, 4
the civilized humanity to “return to nature.” A need that can be compared to my need of writing on the importance of a non-state of mind in today’s even more advanced and civilized world.

3.1 Chapter conclusion

In Descartes’ optic reason is perceived as a positive factor that is inborn and should be pursued in its purity, in Rousseau’s optic reason is viewed as a negative factor that has occurred as a destructive result during the civilization process. As the inherent idea of a non-state of mind suggests it is essentially contradictory to Descartes’ rationalist position, and closely connected to Rousseau’s idea of man’s natural state. The concept non-state of mind focuses on the opponent to rational reasoning: mental absence, and its purpose concords in many senses with Rousseau’s advice to mankind to discard of his reason in order to recover his ideal wholeness and natural sentiment.

Despite their fundamental differences and opposite positions in relation to a non-state of mind, Rousseau and Descartes share nevertheless in several ways the same intentions and the same profound faith in human dignity: Both of them criticize their contemporaries for being guided by a societial destructive logic rather than by themselves, and both want to create a more free-thinking individual who is connected to himself in his purity. The similarities in their intentions are however confronted by their methods which are contradictory in their essence due to their conflicting epistemological standpoints on particularly reason.
3. Modern artworks with transcendental and meditative aspirations

[...] I believe, therefore, that the world is governed by a wise and powerful Will; I see it or rather I feel it, and it is a great thing to know this.79

3.1 An introduction
Since the progress of civilization and secularization questions of the conditio humana almost disappear from Western awareness.80 And most modern artworks executed since the Renaissance derive from a secular worldview separated from a spiritual understanding of the nature of human beings and their relationship with the Absolute.81

The three artists, Bill Viola (1951-), Edward Hopper (1882-1967) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970) challenge this tendency by their execution of artworks, which can be said to include ‘eternal and transcendental verities’ and which retrieve aspects of the sacred, that has been marginalized in modern life. The three artists are similarly artists confronting Rousseau’s critical view on modern artists and Descartes’ critic of his contemporaries. None of them can be interpreted as being solely interested in gaining their contemporaries’ recognition and in adapting their talents to the prevailing popular taste. Negating Descartes’ and Rousseau’s fears of a dominant societal logic, Hopper, Viola and Rothko have each followed their own individual path and expression. Rather than having been influenced by the artistic and societal currents of their time, they have executed works against the norm, independent of the common consent. Bill Viola clarifies his artistic path in the following statement:

The rules for the artist ultimately do not come from art history, or from current trends, ideas, and fashions, or even from the materials themselves. These are merely resources to draw on. The real rules come from the Self. The only method is Self-knowledge, and its only parameters are that of the Gift, of receiving and in turn passing it on.82

79 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jaques: Emile: Book IV, 272
80 TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): The art of Bill Viola: 169
81 Ibid.: 169
82 VIOLA, Bill - Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House, Writings 1973-1994: 212
3.2 Bill Viola

Bill Viola (1951-) is a contemporary video and installation artist as well as a spiritual intellectual. His main concerns are the basic questions of existence, which he deals with in philosophical, religious and artistic ways. His main subject matters are consciousness, reality, the soul, the mind, religious experience, death, transcendence etc.\(^{83}\)

Viola’s thoughts and artworks are indebted to various mystical traditions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. His spiritual approach confronts the dominant status of the intellect and vision in the Western world and aims at connecting the body and mind. Bill Viola is particularly interesting as an artist taking into consideration his way of expressing ancient existential ideas by means of modern high-technological media.

*Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983) is a video and sound installation by him that I find particular interesting and effect full. It shows a small stone house placed in the middle of a room. The house is surrounded by video projections displaying snow-covered mountains and heavy clouds. The footage is accompanied by the noisy sound of wind. There is a small window in the stone house, through which it is possible to view a table, a jar of water, a glass, and a small monitor displaying color video of a mountain. The color video resembles a still of a highland with stony soil and some trees.

When putting one’s head through the small window, the noise of the stormy wind disappears, one notices leaves moving lightly in the wind and hears a low voice reciting the poetry of the 16th-century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591).\(^{84}\)

\(^{83}\) TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): *The art of Bill Viola*: 25

\(^{84}\) His original name was Juan de Yepes
St. John of the Cross was a Spanish poet and pious reformer who was imprisoned for nine months in 1577 because of his religious convictions. His imprisonment found place in a cell the size of the small stone house; the cell had no windows, he was unable to stand upright, and moreover he was frequently tortured. During this period of suffering St. John wrote the now world famous poetry about his growing spiritual freedom through his love for God. Below are examples of his phrases:

St. John: “…And so my mind and soul were blessed/ To understand not understanding,/ All knowledge transcending.”

St. John: “To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not” etc.

St. John writes: “Not living in myself I live/ And wait with such expectancy/ I die because I do not die”

St. John’s poetry tells about his encounter with himself – through that which he cannot see and through that which he cannot hear. He relates his insights and self-reflections to his personal encounters with God. By means of these encounters his

85 TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): The art of Bill Viola: 136
87 TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): The art of Bill Viola: 132
private self emerges through its annihilation within His spiritual presence. St. John’s individual relation to God was radical for his time because of its anti-institutional character and because of his individual self-consciousness being developed through its negation, the step beyond the self as it passes into otherness.88

St. John belongs to the Christian mystical tradition called Via Negativa, which believes in progress by negation, in spiritual development through the dissolution of the self.89 In an interview from … Bill Viola explains:

> The basic tenets of the *Via Negativa* are the unknowability of God: that God is wholly other, independent, complete; that God cannot be grasped by the human intellect, cannot be described in any way; that when the mind faces the divine reality it becomes blank. It seizes up. It enters a cloud of unknowing.90

*Room for St. John* interplays between interiority and exteriority and attempts to manifest physically what is experienced subjectively.91 The exterior and the interior of the house can be viewed as symbolizing opposed states between being and nothingness, between self and other, between ordinary consciousness and a self’s entrance into awareness.92 Intentionally one feels more imprisoned in the larger room than in St. John's cell, which becomes like a refuge, that may make one realize a new understanding of suffering and true liberation.

Another artpiece by Viola that has impressed me is *The Reflecting Pool* is a video and video-performance executed by Bill Viola between 1977-79. Its duration is 9 minutes, after which it loops. The video shows a pool in the middle of a forest, the water of the pool is in constant movement while reflecting the trees. A man (Bill Viola) approaches the pool, he is dressed in colors identical to the forests. Suddenly he screams and jumps, ready to dive. But in the air his body freezes into the position of a baby foster, and gradually the figure dissolves into the forest. Just before its complete dissolve a reflection of a man walking from one side of the pool to the other appears in the water. Shortly after a man and a woman are reflected in the pool walking around and gradually dissolving into the water. The water becomes still and signs of rings are shown, as if something or someone had thrown itself into

88 Ibid.: 130  
89 Ibid.: 131  
90 Ibid.: 131  
91 Ibid.: 135  
92 Ibid.: 141
the water. The pool then becomes dark, almost black, and a shining moving figure is shown, it changes shape between a man and the reflection of sunlight. When the shining figure has disappeared, the pool gets its normal color back and a naked man walks out of it. He walks towards the forest where he disintegrates.

The Reflecting Pool is a typical art piece by Viola in the sense that it incorporates water. Water is a quintessential medium in Viola’s works, which he commonly uses as a symbol of life, birth, rebirth and death - themes that are all represented in this video: The foster position of the man in the frozen jump and the naked man exiting the pool in the end could symbolize birth and rebirth. The dissolve of the figure into nature could signify death, and the appearance and disappearance of the reflections of people in the pool could be indications of the continuous flow of life.

There is no reflection in the water of the frozen man in the air, which could suggest that the figure is in a place in between existence and non-existence. This place ‘in between’ is a basic preoccupation of Violas: “Generally I’m interested in the space within/beneath the things of the world…”93 And generally, as is also the case with The Reflecting Pool, Viola attempts at expressing the inexpressible, or at

93 TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): The art of Bill Viola: 155
expressing what cannot be grasped by the intellect or vision alone: “Yes it is true that the forces behind and beyond our life play an important role in my work, those powers that are beyond what human beings are able to name and control.”

...The intention of *The Reflecting Pool* seems to be to express the rhythm of *life* and *being* in their deepest sense, and to touch something profound and universal in the viewer. The video represents a wholeness where everything merges: the forest and the water, the water and the people, and the people and the forest - as well as time and life which both seem cyclically continuous. In my opinion the video manages to communicate to the viewer that there exists “something deeper within ourselves that endures and lives beyond life span and that is indestructible.”

*The Reflecting Pool* seems to be inspired by Viola’s interest in the Sri Lankan art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy’s belief, that one through contemplation can achieve a pure state of mind, that allows one to perceive a fundamental insight shared by various religions. According to this belief, all

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95 TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): *The art of Bill Viola*: 189
96 VIOLA, Bill: Speech at Otis College, 2009, Youtube
97 Ananda Coomaraswamy belonged to the twentieth-century school of thought called Traditionalism
phenomena are manifestations of a divine principle and can be understood only intuitively.  

3.3 Edward Hopper
Edward Hopper (1882-1967) was an American painter traditionally classified as a realist painter of modernity. He is mainly known for his representations of the objects that constitute the modern life: gasoline stations, rail roads, bars, hotels and offices, as well as of his depictions of isolated individuals looking into nothingness. The categorization of Hopper as a realist is a statement with modifications, as he did not limit himself to a pure mimetic representation of an objective reality. On the contrary, he stated: “My objective has always been the most exact transposition possible of my intimate impressions” and he consequently combined his motives with his own inventions, and visualized his interior vision and subjective perception in all of his works.

Hopper was a man short of words, and contrary to Rothko and Viola, it is not certain what his intention was with his works. It is however known that he was well-read, interested in literature, psychology and philosophy. The American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was one of his favorite writers, well known for his thoughts on the ephemeral character of life and people, opposed to the permanent character of the soul or a spiritual reality: “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE.”

In almost all of Hopper’s artworks it is in my opinion possible to trace demonstrations of this transcendentalism of Emerson. Below I have selected three of his paintings to analyze. I am however aware that my interpretation of Hopper’s

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98 TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): *The art of Bill Viola*: 169
99 SOARES, Eduardo Martins(ed): *Os grandes artistas*: 36
100 KRANZFELDER, Ivo: *Hopper*: 182
101 This trait of visualizing and see makes him related to the German romantic movement that elevated the interior eye to the belief of the human soul reflecting the universe. The quote by Caspar David Friedrich expresses the quint-essence of this vision: “The painter should not only paint what he sees in front of him, but equally what he sees in himself.” (Kranzfelder, Ivo: 182)
102 KRANZFELDER, Ivo: *Hopper*: 47
103 *Ibid.*: 89
104 EMERSON, Ralph Waldo: *The Over-Soul*: 84
artworks can be challenged and criticized which is the case of most great artworks that can be interpreted in various ways without a definite answer.

*Edward Hopper: Four lane Road, 1956, Oil on canvas, 69.8 x 105.4 cm*

*Four lane Road* shows a gas station and its middle-aged owner, both situated next to two roads in the middle of Nature it seems. The owner of the gas station is sitting to the right in front of a building that appears to be both his house and working space. A woman, most likely his wife, is shouting at him out of one of its windows. The man is not paying attention to her shouting but is staring into the blue seemingly indifferent to everything around him. He appears as static and inexpressive as the petrol pumps behind him. It is sunny weather and the landscape outside the house is calm, perhaps reflecting the state of mind of the man. In *Four lane Road*, as in many of his other paintings, Hopper depicts a couple with a problematic connection. Here the man obviously prefers to stay outside in open air than to be enclosed in a domestic house close to another person.
Office in a Small Town represents an employee in his office who is leaned back in his chair while looking out of a large window with a view over the town. The windows seem to be without glass. If the man is contemplating, reflecting or absentminded is not to tell, yet his relaxed pose suggests that he is taking a break from work. In front of him is a house that in its red color and architecture contrasts with the surrounding universe of concrete and geometric lines. The sky is blue and sunlight is lighting up the office inside and outside. The lack of window glass, and the similarity of brightness inside and outside the office, point towards an absence of distinction between the interior and the exterior of the office, and perhaps between the exterior and the interior of the man. As if the mind of the man is merging with the exterior universe as exemplified in Four Lane Road.

105 KRAZFELDER, Ivo: Hopper: 158
Edward Hopper: *Rooms by the Sea*, 1951, oil on canvas 73.7 x 101.6 cm

*Rooms by the Sea* is a painting of two connected rooms next to the sea. The room in front appears unfurnished, whereas the room in the back shows indications of a sofa, a painting and a chest of drawers. Both rooms are being lit by sunlight, casting great light reflections on the walls. In the front room a transparent door is facing the sea. Similar to the office windows in the above painting, the door appears to be without glass. The colors of the room’s walls are the same as the colours of the blue sky outside. The painting depicts a very tranquil atmosphere both inside and outside of the rooms. The similar ambience, the lack of glass in the door and the identical colours of the walls and the sky all function to make the sea seem like an extension of the room. As if the exterior and interior are merging.

3.4 Mark Rothko
Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was an American painter of Russian descent. He is categorized as an abstract expressionist and is mainly known for his rectangular paintings of color and light. He initially painted surrealist mythological subjects, but with time he arrived at his final style, which generally comprises two or three right-angled color fields painted on top of each other on a colorful background.
Often his colors are luminous, and one of Rothko's greatest talents is his mastery of combining a wide range of colors of differing hues and proportions in a single painting. However, it was not color combinations that were his objective:

I’m not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else… I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions (...) The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them, and if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point.106

I find Rothko’s paintings deeply touching, capable of connecting me instantly to my soul and a spiritual dimension of life. When I recently became aware of the existence of a chapel with his paintings I was certain to include it in my thesis. Rothko was in 1964 commissioned to design a chapel in Texas and equip it with his paintings. The invitation and the funding came from the affluent and altruistic, modern art collectors, John and Dominique de Menil. The de Menils were Catholic but recognized wider spiritual convictions and in Rothko’s paintings they saw a sense of a modern and universal religious spirit. Inspired by Rothko’s paintings, they wished to create an intimate sanctuary available to people of every belief.107 The chapel was baptised the Rothko chapel, and on its webpage it says: “The mission of the Rothko Chapel is to inspire people to action through art and contemplation, to nurture reverence for the highest aspirations of humanity, and to provide a forum for global concerns.”108

Rothko had for a long time been searching to exhibit his art outside the conventional locations such as museums, galleries, private collections, and institutional commissions.109 He found the contemplative ambience and respectful silence of a chapel, to be the perfect venue for his paintings, and in 1971 the chapel was inaugurated.110

107 Mrs. De Menil was of the opinion that Rothko's works represented a "search for the infinite" and she believed that “real creators, always working at the edge of their perceptions, may reach spiritual regions bordering on the sacred.”
108 In chapter IV of its incorporative charter it is stated the the chapel is “to provide a place of worship, a place of meditation and prayer for people to gather and explore spiritual bonds common to all, to discuss human problems of world-wide interest, and also share a spiritual experience, each loyal to his belief, each respectful of the beliefs of others.” (BARNES, Susan J: The Rothko Chapel, An Act of Faith, Rothko Chapel: 108)
110 Ibid.: 44
The Rothko Chapel has a geometric, octagonal shape, is small, windowless and contains fourteen of Rothko’s works, divided into eight separate units. On the north, east and west walls are triptychs of three adjoining paintings. On the south wall, and on each of the diagonal walls are four single paintings.\textsuperscript{111} Two of the triptychs and one single painting consist of black hard-edged rectangles on a maroon field; one triptych and four single panels are entirely black, covered with a wash of maroon.\textsuperscript{112}

All the paintings were created specifically for the chapel. They are very large and executed with a reduced palette of only two colors, red and black, using predominantly variations in the thickness of paint to produce nuances of color. The large canvasses and the darkly toned almost monochrome purple and black paintings

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.: 65
\textsuperscript{112} Despite its basis in religious symbolism (the triptych) and less-than-subtle imagery (the crucifixion), the paintings are difficult to attach specifically to traditional Christian symbolism.
are more than any of his other works expressions of transcendental existence.\textsuperscript{113} Mrs de Menil expressed: “The Chapel paintings are a supreme achievement of Rothko’s life. They are the expression of an artist deeply moved by the tragedy of the human condition. They are an endeavor to go beyond art. They are an attempt to create a timeless space.”\textsuperscript{114}

Rothko’s chapel paintings have made many people sense an atmosphere of somber tranquility similar to a religious experience and meditation. The atmosphere has made the chapel become a most visited place for private meditation as well as for public events concerned with global issues - including participants from many different countries and cultures.\textsuperscript{115} Regularly the chapel is on the top ten lists of places to visit in America, and it has been featured in National Geographic’s Sacred Places of a Lifetime: 500 of the World’s Most Peaceful and Powerful Destinations.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{113} BARNES, Susan J: The Rothko Chapel, An Act of Faith: 65
\textsuperscript{114} http://www.rothkochapel.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=36&Itemid=47
\textsuperscript{115} BARNES, Susan J: The Rothko Chapel, An Act of Faith: 15
\textsuperscript{116} http://www.rothkochapel.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=36&Itemid=47
3.5 Chapter conclusion

Viola, Hopper and Rothko are three artists of particular importance to the theme of my thesis as they can all be interpreted to work from a *non-state of mind*, from which they sense and express life in its purity. In each their ways the analyzed artworks all eliminate the importance of both reason, the mind and the ego, and the artworks thus confront Descartes’ philosophy in its essence - Especially its strong faith in human reason which became the starting point of the Modern era, and its idea of ‘cogito ergo sum’ that has been accepted as true during generations and in many ways it still is.

In his *Discourse on the Sciences and Art* Rousseau laments how the current sciences and the arts only deal with external elements of the human existence, how they are superficial and corrupting the inner world of human nature, disconnecting people from a genuine and pure feeling of existence and a “unity of all things.” In discord with Rousseau’s lamentation, Viola, Hopper and Rothko all produce artworks intuitively, from the depths of their souls. More than anything, their works convey a spiritual dimension that is precisely rooted in a unified level or state of reality, and which can be interpreted as connected to Rousseau’s concept of God’s *Surpreme Intelligence*.

In the following chapter I will continue to discuss as a first conclusion the selected artworks in the context of Descartes’ impact on Modern culture and Rousseau’s civilization critic, and I will examine and evaluate the artists different means of communicating profound meditative and pure states of minds.
4. The significance of artworks of transcendental and meditative value in the context of Descartes’ rational logic and Rousseau’s criticism of civilization

I have seen many who philosophized much more learnedly than myself, but they were, in a manner, strangers to their own philosophy. Wanting to appear more learned than others, they studied the universe to know how it was arranged, as they would have studied any machine they saw, from mere curiosity. They studied human nature to be able to speak of it learnedly, but not to know themselves; they laboured to instruct others, but not to enlighten themselves.117

Descartes’ two written works *Discourse on the Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* demonstrate numerous examples of Descartes’ logic that can now be traced as corner stones in our Western culture. The most important of these being Descartes’ central belief that man by focusing exclusively on developing and using his reason could approach a God-like ability to shape the world to fit his needs. This thought was groundbreaking at his time. However today his scenario has become so standardized and incorporated into most people’s daily life that it has become the normal and accepted mode of living.

In line with Descartes’ emphasis on human logical reasoning the modernization process predominantly worked from a logic of division, specialization and constant development in order to effectivize, rationalize and facilitize human life - not only the materialistic and scientific aspects of it but also its non-materialistic aspects. As written in section 2.1.3. Descartes’ mechanistic and calculative reasoning was inspired from algebra and later applied to the human sciences. This rational approach to the human world and Descartes’ belief that human reason is the basis of all knowledge became the starting points of the *Enlightenment era*, which defied everything that could not be understood by rational knowledge as meaningless or superstitious.118

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117 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*: third walk, 171
118 Despite Descartes’ radical approach he never undermined God’s existence, on the contrary he invented a rational justification of Him. In his *Discourse on the Method* is included a ‘provisional moral code’ that primarily states: ‘to obey the rules and customs of his country and his religion and never take an extreme opinion.’ This moral code - including Descartes’ rational justification of God’s existence - may possibly have been invented to make his ideas more acceptable among his contemporaries, not least the authorities. Alternatively Descartes sincerely believed in his rational religious scenario. Although the reasoning behind this scenario appear rather deficient and have
Rousseau belongs among the most important Enlightenment figures when it comes to his emphasis on human dignity. However he could not support the Enlightenment’s dominant belief in the superiority of Reason and he condemned the current and progressing civilisation for being solely rational and materialistic and not beneficial to human nature as a whole. He saw the increasing punctuality, calculability and exactness as forced upon life and diminishing the irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses that determine the mode of life from within.

When writing his discourses Rousseau did not have much faith in the artists whom he perceived were all conforming to the same pattern. He considered none of them capable of or interested in producing artworks from their souls and with a potential of eternal and universal value. According to Rousseau the civilization process had depraved man, artist or not, from his real nature, from his original authenticity and integrity. It had lead to a material and intellectual progress, that had not been beneficial to the human nature as a whole, but corrupted his independence, moral and happiness.

Viola, Hopper and Rothko are all artists who are not conforming to Rousseau’s critical viewpoints. On the contrary, the three artists are all interested in and connected to a deeper source of life, and similar to Rousseau they strive to go beyond civilization, to free themselves and others from modern development and standards, and present an alternative or additional perspective to the one-sided materialistic progress of civilization based on rationality, property and comparison.

Through their artworks they intend in various ways to communicate a spiritual state of life that enables the audience to sense an inner state of pure being, a state of life outside reach of the intellect. They wish to connect man to his whole nature and to make him sense a universal wholeness.

generated the little flattering concept Cartesian Circle, at least it comprises an openmindedness to a spiritual understanding of the world. An openmindedness which during the Enlightenment process virtually disappeared – notwithstanding Rousseau’s objection to the rationalization of his culture.

Rousseau lived during the Enlightenment period and can be considered as both a supporter and a critic of the movement - depending on its definition. In relation to Kant’s definition of Enlightenment as: “Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity” Rousseau was one of the most important figures. (KANT, Immanuel: An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment? (1784): 58)
More or less unconsciously, the artists all work from a logic that confronts Descartes’ “method for rightly conducting one’s reason,” they object to the dominant use of words and the intellect, and aim to communicate using a meditative and sensory logic contrary to the rational logic of civilization. Their means of conveying the same message are however very different, which is what I find interesting and inspiring.

_Bill Viola_ is the most technological of the three artists, employing video and installations to illuminate the depths of our souls. By giving his viewers a whole-body experience complete with sensory involvement his art communicates simultaneously to the viewer’s head and heart as well as to his body and spirit, and erases the division between object and subject. Viola defies the predominance of _ocularexcentrism_ that has been the guideline of our civilization since Descartes who in his treatise _La Dioptrique_ [120] (1637) categorises the sight as the noblest of our senses and famously declares how man senses with his mind and not his body. [121]

Viola’s works challenge the modern dominance of the vision and the intellect in the appreciation of artworks. He intends to touch the viewers at not only physical or perceptive levels but even more on a _visceral_ level. As he explains, his art is about the insides of things, about being within, about mediation. It thus has a direct link to Rousseau’s concept of ‘the natural state’ of the savage, where people are less self aware, and _being_ rather than _appearing_.

Viola is of the opinion that art has a vital function in society in its ability of making people realize a forgotten wholeness and a sense of Being itself. He considers that the accelerating development of technology has outstripped the spiritual and intellectual capacity of human beings, and states that: “Today, development of the self must precede the development of the technology or we will go nowhere.” [122]

The means by which Viola intends the viewer to develop his self is primarily to remove him from the ordinary world for the sake of a few moments of

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[120] One of three treatises appended to his _Discourse on method_,
[121] JAY, Martin: _Downcast Eyes. The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought_: 70-75
[122] TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): _The art of Bill Viola_: 192
meditation. Hereby he wishes to make the viewer aware of and sense himself as part of a deeper level of life, a level before thoughts and value judgments:

I have been trying for so long to show the side of life I believe in – to live in that space – to understand and use the language of that space as the formulas of my work.” (…) “The key is getting beyond value judgments, and touching the pure mind. 124

As most of Viola’s video and art installations are about the relationship between his work and the viewer standing in or in front of it, he is each time concerned with engaging the viewer. With Room for St. John of the Cross it is obvious how Viola’s aim is to give the viewer a whole-body experience complete with sensory involvement, and how it works to make the audience sense a strong difference between being inside and outside the stone house. Inside the house it is warm, serene and illuminated, outside it is cold, noisy and chaotic. The inside represents the enlightened self of St. John who had achieved a spiritual development through his encounter with God and the dissolution of his self.

Since Viola does not belong to a particular religion I do not assume that the piece should be understood in specific Christian or God-related terms. Rather I see it connected to Viola’s belief that the sacred is within us all, and his wish to make people acknowledge and experience it. Contrary to the secularization theory, Viola does not presume that the sacred is an element that belongs to certain pre-modern stages in history, rather he perceives it is a general and timeless component in the structure of consciousness. In our times this component has become marginalized, and Viola aims to make art that can help repristinate our secular culture. He believes in art’s potential in retrieving the sacred, and laments art’s lack of function in present societies:

[…] most of today’s art bears no functional relationship to the communities it is being presented in, at least not in any formal or generally recognized way. The larger society does not consider that art serves any central function, not in the way science and technology are perceived to do. 125

For Viola’s work to succeed in its intentions, it necessitates however the viewer’s willingness to let the work have an effect upon him, and to enter into its world. This

123 Ibid.: 106
125 Ibid.: 277
requires open-mindedness and time from the viewer, perhaps beyond the duration of a single work. Some pieces by Viola are in my opinion so strong that they immediately make the viewer and the piece, the subject and the object merge. *The Reflecting Pool* is a piece that I find instantly enables the viewer to sense himself as part of a greater unity by intuitively awakening something at the roots of his soul. It does so by communicating simultaneously to the viewer’s head and heart as well as to his body and spirit, and by erasing the division between object and subject. The facts that the video is made in slow-motion and is accompanied by a continuous and monotone buzz of insects, wind and water further function to increase a meditative atmosphere, that drags the viewer into the piece, feeling part of this deeper level of reality.

*Edward Hopper* is using the most traditional means of expressing his ideas. In a classical painting style he represents human figures gazing meditatively into the blue and appearing so mentally absent-minded, that they seem unaware of their surroundings.

Hopper’s figures are often generalized and impersonal and most of his depictions have an artificial or fictitious character. In relation to Rousseau’s civilization critic the stereotypic character of Hopper’s figures, their lack of expression, communication and action, could be interpreted as negative side effects of civilization: as signs of alienation and dehumanization in a society, where “One no longer dares to appear what one is, all act in a similar way.” It is plausible to read Hopper’s figures as subjects to Rousseau’s label of *civilized slaves*: bored, apathetic instruments overshadowed by the modern world’s exterior dominance and materialistic demands.

It is however even more likely in my opinion to point out that Hopper’s artworks contain a spiritual element, an essence of life or a ‘mystification of the banal’ that is too explicit to be ignored and that does not harmonize with the interpretation of alienation. To me his paintings are more than anything articulations of serene, mystic atmospheres, that elicit a connection to a universal silent and deeper state of reality.

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126 TOWNSEND, Chris (ed.): *The art of Bill Viola*: 59
127 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques - *Discourse on the Sciences and Art*: 8

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None of Hopper’s figures seem influenced by Descartes’s logic of rationalism and advancement, as none appear preoccupied with a calculative or efficient way of living or thinking. No matter whether they are working, travelling or taking a rest, they behave with a relaxed attitude and the time and ability to let go of their thoughts. As is the case in *Four Lane Road* and *Office in a small town* his figures are virtually physically inactive and appearing mentally reflexive or absent-minded. In my interpretation Hopper’s figures express life states of pure being, representing people who are not in control, but who like animals appear to deal frankly with life in a relaxed and peaceful way.

The serenity Hopper’s figures evoke, assures the beholder that there still exists a ‘tranquil life’ of man. In opposition to Rousseau’s characterization of the civilized man, Hopper’s people seem to have been able to keep their inborn animalistic or human centre intact, and to have avoided to become affected by continuous competition, stress and other diseases of civilization.

The fact that his figures behave in the same way, no matter whether they are working or taking a rest makes them seem connected to a shared and deeper, meditative state of life. A supporting factor is that Hopper to a large degree spent his career painting the same picture without regard to the political, artistic or social changes of his country. This contributes to an understanding of his works as demonstrating that the human condition in its essence is unalterable and connected to a deeper spiritual reality. Similarly, as is especially obvious with the husband in *Four Lane Road*, his figure appears so absorbed into himself or another level of reality that he does not seem to be aware of his surroundings.

Hopper intensifies the apparent transcendental and contemplative state of mind of his figures by depicting calm surroundings, which help to signify the interior states of the soul. The tranquil and meditative appearance of both his figures and his spaces make the two melt together as if man was merging with the universe. Demonstrated in for example *Office in a small town* and *Rooms by the Sea* Hopper has additionally avoided painting glass in the windows and door, in this way illustrating an absence of a demarcation line between interior and exterior.

A religious sentiment was present in Hopper’s earlier works, but this sentiment was gradually substituted with a void, a vacuum.\textsuperscript{128} In the majority of his

\textsuperscript{128} KRANZFELDER, Ivo: *Hopper*: 70
paintings the world appears exposed to emptiness. In my opinion Hopper’s vacuum hides more than it reveals, representing in its blankness associations to a spiritual level of eternity. I find this emptiness and transcendent level emanating profoundly out of all the three analyzed paintings.

Rousseau advised the civilized man to distance himself to the present way of living, to take a break from reality and sense a deeper meaning from within. I believe Hopper’s figures can be perceived as doing so.

In contrast to Viola and Hopper, Mark Rothko conveys his messages in the most non-representational and simplistic way. He wants nothing to disturb or interfere with the beholders’ minds - except the independent, contemplative spirit of his paintings. By means of very simple and pure methods he equivalently achieves to communicate to the depth of the viewers’ souls.

Rothko paints without any subject matter related to the realm of the physical and the intellectual. In the chapel paintings all referential images are removed from his paintings, they lack identifiable figures, spaces and even titles. It was his general approach to abandon the use of titles and only add numbers to his paintings or descriptive titles referring to the colors.

When asked about his works, he answered: “Silence is the most precise word.” He wished to leave the viewer confront his art, unhindered and unaided, and feared that words or referential figures would disrupt the mind and paralyze the imagination.

In his opinion no program notes can explain about paintings, as their explanation must come out of a pure and ideal experience between picture and beholder. He perceived the appreciation of art as a true marriage of minds: “A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer.”

Rothko was committed to express basic and universal human emotions, as well as timeless ideas and truths common to people of all religions, places and ages. To be able to convey these profound messages he had to communicate from

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129 ROTHKO, Mark: *A realidade do artista. Filosofias da arte*: 1 (my own translation of the sentence “O silencio é o mais acertado.”)
130 BARNES, Susan J: *The Rothko Chapel, An Act of Faith*: 24
131 Ibid.: 25
132 Ibid.: 45
the depth of his soul, from a pre-verbal level outside reach of words, and he often spent hours sitting in front of a blank canvas in quiet contemplation before beginning to paint.

Rothko’s artistic beliefs make great demands of himself as an artist as well as of his audience.\textsuperscript{133} He has to convey his message, his sense of subject to the viewer by the purely formal means of painting – the size of the canvas, the proportion and scale of the forms, colors of forms and of ground, and the quality of his brushstroke.\textsuperscript{134} He believed this was the most powerful way for him to transmit a purely spiritual or emotional realm and to make his paintings transcend “obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer”, such as “memory, history, or geometry.”\textsuperscript{135}

The chapel paintings are all dark and very large in scale. The size is important to Rothko as he explains: “I paint large pictures because I want to create a state of intimacy. A large picture is an immediate transaction; it takes you into it.”\textsuperscript{136} His choice of applying an almost monochrome purple color to the chapel paintings could most likely be related to the fact that purple is a color generally related to spirituality and enlightenment, perceived to evoke introspection and calmness.

The size and colors of his paintings as well as the spirit behind his brush strokes truly work in my point of view to convey a deep transcendental message of contemplation and spirituality. Convincingly he manages to express the inexpressible in his paintings, to make them have their own reality and convey a timeless and universal spirit and atmosphere. Rothko’s works are examples of his statement: “A painting doesn’t need anybody to explain what it is about. If it is any good, it speaks for itself…”\textsuperscript{137}

The aspirations of Rousseau’s discourses and the analyzed artworks are not fully identical, but have many fundamental similarities. According to Rousseau the intellectualization of man and the evolution of man’s faculties have not developed out of humanitarian reasons. Rather it has depraved man from his real nature, lead

\textsuperscript{133} BARNES, Susan J: \textit{The Rothko Chapel, An Act of Faith}: 22
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.: 22
\textsuperscript{135} GELDZAHLER, Henry: \textit{American Painting in the 20th century}: 189
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.: 25
\textsuperscript{137} www.amazon.com/Writings-Art-Mark-Rothko/product-reviews/0300114400
to immorality and unhappiness and generated a loss of individual authenticity and integrity.

Viola, Hopper and Rothko are artists who not only confront Rousseau’s negative viewpoints but who also agree with many of them. Precisely as Rousseau recommends, they produce artworks that origin from the depths of their souls, and that have humanitarian - and most likely - eternal value.

In opposition to Descartes’ division between the human mind as “finite and limited” and God as a “Being who is incomprehensible and infinite,” the artists work from a contrary perception that unites the two. Following Descartes’ rationale the idea of God and a perfect truth can only be understood by our rational minds. The artists however believe that solely by letting go of our minds is it possible to become connected to the truth of a godlike “supreme intelligence” and sense a merging of a “unity of all things.” Rousseau concords with the artists and likewise confronts Descartes’ logic by stating that a “state of reflection is a state contrary to nature, and that a thinking man is a depraved animal.” He is convinced that the savage stage in between animality and humanity was the best and happiest period for man. At this stage, people were not only more equal and independent, they were also more connected to themselves, their real nature, their own judgments and value. It is Rousseau’s advice for the civilized man to begin to search inwards as he perceives it as the only way for man to become reconnected to himself and to regain the lost virtue of his time.

In various ways, Viola, Hopper and Rothko all execute artworks that correspond to Rousseau’s idea that there exists an absolute, universal and ideal conditio humana which exists prior to human reason, and they all present ways to reach that state. Consistently and thoroughly they communicate through their individual artistic language in a way that attempts to reconnect man to a state of pure being, to a deeper level of life. They do so by producing art that origins from the depths of their souls and that object against Descartes’ philosophy and its impact on our modern lifes, in particular its division between our “limited minds” and Gods “infinite Being,” and the rationalization of our culture.

138 ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques: Discourse on The Origin and the Foundations of inequality Among Men: 138
Independently of their artistic methods I think all the artists equally manage to convey profound transcendental messages in their artworks, messages that communicate to our souls and deeper selves, and that have important information to transmit to us civilized beings. As stated by Viola in the initial quote on page 1: “[…] we have been the inheritors of a scientific materialistic point of view that holds that the way to understand is to divide, to separate, to isolate, to categorize, to specialize […]” and as he continues: “[…] we now have to put the whole back together.” I concur with his statement, and I believe in the importance of a non-state of mind as a medium to recover this lost wholeness present in our secularized, civilized and advanced world. Equivalently I am of the opinion that artworks of transcendental and meditative value have a great potential and important role to play in this regard.

139 VIOLA, Bill: Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House, Writings 1973-1994: 270
5. My own artistic practice

There is no reality except the one contained within us. That’s why so many people live an unreal life. They take images outside them for reality and never allow the world within them to assert itself.140

When it comes to my own artistic practice, it is my intention to produce artworks that are inspired by meditative and pure levels of existence and that can hopefully inspire their viewers to pure non-states of minds.

My artworks originate in the visual and cleansing effect a meditative practice, can have on the mental states of its practitioners, and it is directly connected to the concept non-state of mind. Similarly it bears resemblances to Rousseau’s idea of the healthiness of the savage’s mind, which is not preoccupied with worries and unnecessary thoughts. It is likewise related to the profound and meditative levels of existence, as demonstrated in the artistic practice by Viola, Rothko and Hopper. Similar to them it is my wish to attempt to capture and express this universal meditative state of mind, which all their artworks comprise.

In relation to the execution of my practical works, I initially attended four meditative meetings and asked to take a photograph of each of the practitioners after they had been meditating/chanting for at least one hour. I attended two buddhist meditation sessions, an aura-reading session and a yoga-meditation session. The buddhist meditation sessions took place in two different organisations: the Japanese founded Soka Gakkai International141 and the Portuguese Uniao Buddista Portuguesa.142 The aura-reading was guided by the Portuguese aura-reader, Tania Guerreia, and the yoga-meditation session was lead by the Danish yoga teacher Solveig Egebjerg, and took place in her Bornholm yoga and retreat center in Denmark143, which I visited when I went to visit my home country in December 2012. In Appendix 8.1 – Letter to SGI, I have attached the letter I wrote to the Soka Gakkai International buddhist group in Lisbon to ask for their permission to participate in my project. The other groups I contacted by either phone or by visiting their meditation centers.

140 HESSE, Hermann: Demian: 115
141 http://www.sgi.org/
142 http://www.uniaobudista.pt
143 http://www.bornholmyoga.dk
The meditative or transcendental practices all have the same purpose in common: to connect their practitioners to a deeper and purer self, and to a deep and pure state of life. And additionally to make the practitioners sense themselves connected to a wider universal rhythm in the universe.

My intention was to capture in the photographs, people, who feel profoundly connected to themselves and life and who evoke a greater sense of connectedness to the universe. And afterwards to execute artworks from these photographs, inspired by their meditative states of minds. The photographs were thus initially meant as only a means to inspire my final works. During the process however I decided to also include the photographs in my final works as I realized their quality in themselves as expressions of my theme. In Appendix 8.2 – Photographs of a non-state of mind I have included a selection of the photos that I have taken. I have chosen to show three photos of each of the yoga- and buddhist meditation visits, and two photos from the aura-reading season, one of the aura-reader Tania Guerreia and one of myself after having experienced an hour of aura-reading. When taking the photos of the people from Uniao Buddista Portuguesa I asked the people to close their eyes to test if it would increase the effect of their meditative states of minds in the photos, turning the focus inwards. I show the photos without dividing them into their meditative origin or practice, as I believe they are all expressions of the same state of mind. When names are not included next to the portraits, it is due to people preferring to be anonymous.

It took a long time to come up with ideas of how to painterly express my concept of a non-state of mind. I went through several thought experiments and practical trial-and-error processes before I was satisfied and decided to complete the presented ideas and works as shown in Appendix 8.4 – Paintings on a non-state of mind. The first paintings were executed with the intention of painting the photographed people realistically while focusing specifically on portraying and capturing their meditative states of minds; next I explored various ways of expressing these non-states of minds in a more creative, conceptual and original painterly manner. I painted the people with closed eyes as I evaluated that it would direct the attention to the interior state of mind of the person and I finally painted a thin layer of the background colour on top of the person to express his/her mental merging with his surroundings. Painting #1 in Appendix 8.3 – Painterly
explorations on a non-state of mind is one example of this working process. Inspired by Hopper’s paintings I continued to investigate on strategies that could express the figures’ merging with their surroundings and the universe, making the exterior express the interior state of the person. Painting #2 shows one of my paintings based on a typical Hopper approach. My focus was all the time on expressing mental absence, and I ended up eventually choosing to paint people surrounded by the tone of grey, this tone of grey symbolizing their non-states of minds, and “the merging of all things.” The idea of the tone of grey was inspired by Viola’s concept, “the tone of being”, which he defines as a constant undersound of life where all sounds merge.\(^\text{144}\)

I started each painting by painting a person and his surroundings, and afterwards erasing the person’s surroundings by the grey colour. In my explorations of this idea I experimented with painting several figures together as well as positioning the figures differently. After various experiments I concluded that the most effective way of expressing my idea of a non-state of mind is to paint only one person in each painting and to paint the person from behind. As it is visible in Appendix 8.4 – Paintings of a non-state of mind I have experimented with erasing the figures’ surroundings completely or leaving a little trace behind, and I am still considering which method works better in relation to my theme. None of the paintings have any titles as I find this best expresses their emptiness, their demonstrated mental absence.

My focus on mental absence furthermore inspired me to create an installation of twelve small meditating sculptures (work in progress, see Appendix 8.5). The surfaces of the sculptures are made of mixed media, while their structures are made of plastic bags. Today’s overconsumption, overproduction and overpollution can all be exemplified in our ceaseless use of plastic bags. Instead of discarding of plastic bags during one month I decided to turn them into meditating sculptures. As introductorily written it is my belief that man without being connected to an inner pure dimension, is not able to properly sense himself or the universe; - and as a result not capable of creating a healthy and harmonious relationship to the world. Similar to my other artworks it is my ambition that these

\(^{144}\) VIOLA, Bill: Interview, Louisiana Musuem, Denmark, 2013, youtube
meditating sculptures will inspire their beholders to sense a universal wholeness. And maybe be inspired to think and act differently in relation to for example their use of plastic bags.

While executing my artworks I was frequently listening to meditation sessions on my Ipad, and sometimes I spent time meditating before I started painting or creating sculptures. I was interested in experiencing to which extend a meditative state of mind is necessary in order to create artworks of meditative aspirations. However executing art is in itself a form of meditation for me. It is a process where I lose awareness of time and space and myself, where my mind gradually enters into a non-state of mind. I think this is the case for many artists, and I am convinced that both Viola, Hopper and Rothko experience(d) the same way when producing their artworks. This creative self-obliviousness is an important point of mine which further stresses my belief in the significance of art’s potential; not only are final art pieces in my opinion capable of evoking serenity and a non-state of mind in their beholders, also the art creation itself often involves stages of self-obliviousness to oneself and one’s surroundings. To me these stages are most valuable since I in these fill most alive and connected to a universal spirit.

**Future works to be done:**

Inspired by Bill Viola it is my aspiration to complement my photos, paintings and sculptures with a video that focuses solely on people breathing. Equivalent to Viola it is my ideal and ambitious goal that my artworks will touch something universal and profound in of their beholders; that the works could make people pause for a moment, feel their breath and sense not only the artworks but also themselves. I have not yet found time to execute the video, yet I have not given up on the idea.

Similar to Rothko I find it important to get art out of its traditional exhibition institutions and integrate art into new places, at least into the public sphere where it instantly communicates to a multitude of people. I believe in art’s potential in serving an important function in society, in engaging people and in communicating vital information. In today’s world, art is mainly understood and appreciated in closed circles of wealthy or art interested people. It is my ideal aim that art could become an appreciated and inspiring part of the everyday-life of everyone. In order
to transmit my idea of a \textit{non-state of mind} to as many people as possible it is another aspiration of mine to print small posters of some of my final works, and hang them in the public sphere, accompanied by a short poem on my theme.
6. End conclusion

Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, be fortified by it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it.\textsuperscript{145}

Descartes is commonly referred to as the founder of our Modern societies. His rational logic and faith in human reasoning quickly received recognition and launched the base of our civilization. Contrary to the promises of those who advocate civilization people appear however everyday more anxious and worried about their lifes, as well as more stressed - running after never-ending objectives, it seems. This is a paradox, as civilization ought to facilitate and improve the living of humankind. Civilization is however not always perceived as an improvement in our overall quality of life. Already in the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century when the Enlightenment, Industrialisation and Urbanisation initiated the foundation for our advanced societies, critical awareness arose. Jean Jacques Rousseau was one of the preliminary critics of the progressing civilisation which he condemned for being solely rational and materialistic and not beneficial to human nature as a whole.

Contrary to Descartes Rousseau’s theories were not well received by his contemporaries and his criticism of our civilization continues needless to say to be overlooked. It was Rousseau’s belief that man in the process of Modernization lost his “natural sentiment” (of compassion) and that he as a result was corrupted in an internal mental sense and consequently in a civic sense. In Rousseau’s perspective human reason when not accompanied by the heart could only act in an insensitive and unproductive way that will eventually harm “the mutual preservation of the entire species.” As he exemplifies in his \textit{Discourse on The Origin and the Foundations of inequality Among Men}, the affluent deceive the needy, the educational system causes superficial thinking, and the societal logic generate inflated needs.

Although I find Rousseau rather onesided in his purely negative criticism of civilization and solely optimistic viewpoint on our “natural state”, I consider many of his viewpoints valid and of continuous importance today. His lamentation of our loss of “natural sentiment” can be related to my emphasis on the importance of or

\textsuperscript{145} HESSE, Hermann: \textit{Siddharta}: 97
revival of a non-state of mind, as both concepts associate to an inner world of human nature and a lack of a genuine and pure feeling of existence in our modern world. Rousseau was quick to notice the destructive social dynamics arising together with the rational and inequal development of civilization. Today these dynamics may explain today’s over-consumption and ecological degradation, alongside with the constantly growing advertising industry promoting unsustainable lifestyles. In concordance with Rousseau I agree that the world would be a better place if people were better at distancing themselves from society, move inwardly and sense a “universal connectedness of all things.” Like the artworks by Viola, Hopper an Rothko demonstrate, it is my belief that art has a very important potential in this regard, in bringing back our rational minds into order - into harmony with a more human, non-material and sacred approach to the world. This being said I wish to finish my thesis with a beautiful excerpt by the German poet and Nobel Prize winner, Hermann Hesse (1877-1962). In his novel The Glass Bead Game (1943) he describes how “genuine serenity of the sky and the mind” is not only one of the highest and finest of goals in life but also the basis of a fundamental cheerfulness:

Such cheerfulness is neither frivolity nor complacency; it is supreme insight and love, affirmation of all reality, alertness on the brink of all depths and abysses; it is a virtue of saints and of knights; it is indestructible and only increases with age and nearness to death. It is the secret of beauty and the real substance of all art. The poet who praises the splendors and terrors of life in the dance measures of his verse, the musician who sounds them in a pure, eternal present – these are bringers of light, increasers of joy and brightness on earth, even if they lead us first through tears and stress. Perhaps the poet whose verses gladden us was a sad solitary, and the musician a melancholic dreamer; but even so their work shares in the cheerful serenity of the gods and the stars. What they give us is no longer their darkness, their suffering or fears, but a drop of pure light, eternal cheerfulness. Even though whole peoples and languages have attempted to fathom the depths of the universe in myths, cosmogonies, and religions, their supreme, their ultimate attainment has been this cheerfulness.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{146} HESSE, Hermann: The Glass Bead Game: 315-316
7. Bibliography

7.1 Primary Reading


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### 7.3 Image sources

**Bill Viola images:**
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http://images.huffingtonpost.com/2012-06-26-40_days_meditation1.jpg

http://wonderingfair.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/rothko-chapel1.jpg
8. Appendix

8.1 Letter to SGI

Dear Soka-Gakkai-member,

I am writing you to ask you a very personal favor that is of great importance to me.

I am currently studying a MA in Painting at the Faculdade de Belas Arte in Lisboa. I am in my final year where I have to write a thesis related to my practical work. The themes of my thesis are a ‘non-state of mind’ and ‘pure being’. By a non-state of mind I think of a serene mental state of absence that is liberated from mental occupations such as thoughts, guilt, worries, memories etc. It is connected to the term ‘pure being’ where one’s self or ego is not distracting the experience of life in its purity, so that a deeper, serene, more unified level or state of reality can be perceived.

To me a non-state of mind is for example not only valuable in itself but also necessary in order to reset the mind and being able to look upon the world with new eyes, an empty mind.

It has always been my aim to communicate life-inspiring ideas to people through my art, and in this MA-thesis which is half theoretical, half practical I would very much like to transmit a pure and absent state of mind through my paintings. From my own experience, I believe it possible to reach this state through meditation or chant, which open ways for people to connect to a deeper and purer rhythm in the universe.

For my practical project I would very much like to take individual photographs of several members after they have been chanting one hour. It should preferably be members who have (practiced for at least 10 years and who have) truly experienced the great impact of practicing Buddhism. In these photographs it is my goal to capture a life-state of purity, absent-mindedness and connectedness to the universe. It is my idea to afterwards paint from the photographs while focusing on capturing this life state in my paintings. If they paintings will turn our realistic or abstract is uncertain to me at this state.

If you accept to be part of my project, we can arrange how to meet. Either I can come to your house and we can chant together one hour and afterwards take a photograph, or we can arrange a group meeting where I afterwards take photographs of the individual members who have accepted to participate.

The photographs I will need to take of each participant is one portrait, one half figure, and one whole figure. My partner is a professional photographer and has offered his help to take the photographs.

I am aware of the intimate and private character of my project, and that it may frighten some from participating, which is understandable. Another problem related to my project is that SGI does not like publicity. My project is however not about SGI but about capturing and transmitting a non-state of mind and pure being. If necessary I will avoid writing in my thesis which kind of Buddhism the practitioners are practicing?

If you are willing to have your portrait taken, let me know as soon as possible. I will be very happy and grateful! Also, if you have any questions, let me know too!

Please forward this email to sincere members who you think could be willing to participate.

Muito obrigada!
Tilde (967569118)
8.2 Photographs of non-state of minds

Elsa Serra, practitioner of Soga Gakkai Buddhism, Lisbon, December 2012.
Gustavo Ribeira, practitioner of Soga Gakkai Buddhism, Lisbon, December 2012.
Beatriz Serra, practitioner of Soga Gakkai Buddhism, Lisbon, December 2012
Yoga-meditation practitioner, Denmark, January 2013
Yoga-meditation practitioner, Denmark, January 2013
Yoga-meditation practitioner, Denmark, January 2013
Practitioner from the Uniao Budista Portuguesa, Lisbon, May 2013
Practitioner from the Uniao Budista Portuguesa, Lisbon, May 2013
Practitioner from the Uniao Budista Portuguesa, Lisbon, May 2013
Tilde Lerche Engstrøm, after one hour of aura-reading, Lisbon, January, 2013
Tania Guerreia, aura-reader, Lisbon, January 2013
8.3 Painterly explorations of a non-state of mind

Painting #1, untitled, oil on canvas, 88x115 cm
Painting #2, untitled, oil on canvas, 120x150 cm
8.4 Paintings of a non-state of mind

Painting #6, untitled, oil on canvas, 88x115 cm
Painting #4, untitled, oil on canvas, 80x100 cm
Painting #3, untitled, oil on canvas, 88x115 cm
Painting #5, untitled, oil on canvas, 80x100 cm
Painting #9, untitled, oil on canvas, 70x70 cm
Painting #8, untitled, oil on canvas, 80x100 cm
Painting #7, untitled, oil on canvas, 80x100 cm
Painting #10, untitled, oil on canvas, 60x70cm
8.5 Sculpture installation (work in progress)
Silence, sculpture installation, mixed media (work in progress).

Silence, sculpture installation, mixed media (work in progress).