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# On the Abolishment of Artistic Hierarchy in Academic Discourse

A Critical Analysis of Lil Uzi Vert's "XO TOUR Llif3"

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Art, Literature, and Contemporary European Thought

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## I. Introduction

Academia's deeply rooted history and ever-present influence of classism and white supremacy make philosophical analyses of contemporary works of art made for and consumed by the mainstream public uncommon, especially when these works of art are made by people from marginalized communities that have been historically oppressed by the white upper class, even those from an intellectual or supposedly cultured background. Popular art is considered low art, even when it can provide an enlightening perspective on our own lives and the lives of those around us. Despite popular culture's power and potential for a deeper understanding of contemporary existence, the world of academia seldom considers analyzing its resulting works of art as "serious art," and rather devalues them by arguing that contemporary popular culture's value is not in its artistic creations, but rather in how they have the potential to reflect our culture's lack of morality, shallowness, hyper-focus on sex, money, and drugs, and so on.

The lack of philosophical analyses for works of art originating from popular culture is reflective of this very denial, and an insistence that in order for art to be worthy of intellectual discourse (discourse specifically related to the art itself, not necessarily to how it can explain or reflect modern day culture), it cannot be popular art, it cannot be "low art" (a designation that, in itself, is largely arbitrary and based on the subjective opinions of those who happen to find themselves in the position to make said designation—in other words, the powerful, whose power comes from a history of subjugating the oppressed). Despite this insistence, the fact remains that the consumption of art, any art, is a completely subjective experience; though the essence of art is universal, each individual brings their own values, experience, and knowledge to the process of consumption, and therefore each individual sees artwork differently from another. As Duchamp argued with his *Fountain*, as Yves Klein argued with his monochrome paintings, and

as Sol LeWitt argued with his conceptual art—defining what counts as art and what does not is an entirely subjective act, which gives any item, any piece, any text the potential to be consumed as art, and therefore analyzed as art. One can look at a Robert Rauschenberg painting on the wall of the Pompidou and decide that it is not art, but despite their protests it nevertheless exists and will continue to exist in the realm of art consumption, and therefore has the potential to be consumed as such, regardless of one consumer's particular opinion. This argument exists outside of visual art consumption and critique as well; Gertrude Stein's poetry lacks any straightforward coherency, and nonetheless it is poetry, still being read and discussed by academics and intellectuals today. John Cage created countless musical pieces that, at the time, provoked fury in the world of music criticism — and yet he remains significant in the history of the avant-garde sound art of the mid to late 20th century. Despite the unpopularity of Cage's experimental music with mainstream culture at the time of its release, his influence now is largely undisputed, and his breakthroughs in sound theory remain significant. With the growing popularity and acceptance of avant-garde works of art such as these, it has become evident that there is no one way to create a work of art, and that any attempt to create rules with which one could define art is ultimately unfruitful at best, and at worst will inevitably be ridiculed and torn apart by the next generation of artists.

Nevertheless, these examples have now all been designated to the world of high art, and therefore are generally inaccessible to the public — contemporary mainstream culture is largely unaware of John Cage's influence, and though Duchamp's *Fountain* remains one of the most celebrated icons of artistic expression, it is unlikely that a random member of the public would be able to explain its historical significance. A contemporary intellectual could argue that a general lack of artistic and cultural knowledge is evidence of the uncultured masses of the 21st

century, a generation addicted to social media, as opposed to one with a readily available repertoire of facts on avant-garde art and music — and this perspective is widely popular amongst older generations. Criticisms of millennial culture flourish amongst political and social discourse, explaining the downfall of “true” culture, the shallowness of 20-somethings, the way we’ve ruined the economy and the way we celebrate scantily-clad women. But is this not just another iteration of the old condemning the new? Furthermore, the racialized ways in which millennial culture is criticized cannot be ignored—African American Vernacular English, a dialect of English from which much contemporary slang originates (and from which much slang has historically originated), is frequently delegitimized as a proper dialect of English. Rather, AAVE is institutionally seen simply as the “wrong” way of speaking, despite the fact that it, too, follows rules and regulations, and therefore functions as a legitimate dialect. Rap music as well, an art form with its history rooted in the Black communities of major cities around the country, is frequently deemed crass and misogynistic, and the nuances that exist within the genre are commonly ignored in favor of its stereotypes. The hierarchy that exists within academic discourse, telling us what we can and cannot analyze, and how we should go about said analysis depending on where in the hierarchy the art exists, restricts our ability to seriously analyze forms of expression within popular culture, and is undoubtedly biased towards content created by members of the upper class, white people, and men (frequently a combination of two or more of these criteria). By seeing, through racialized and gendered lenses no less, certain forms of art as unworthy of critical analysis, we lose entire aspects of contemporary culture. Our view, then, of contemporary culture, is one that separates the aspects that are worthy of critical analysis from the rest. Said view is in its essence restrictive; furthermore, its being founded on a history of classism and racism only perpetuates more deeply this restrictive nature. Rather than criticizing

the supposed simplicity of “low” art, can we not instead view it as an enlightening and potentially profound form of expression, equal to any other form of artistic expression? Can we not listen to a popular rap song and see within it the same theoretical elements that exist within a John Cage composition? Does a popular rap song not also have the potential to pose existential questions regarding the finitude of humanity? Simply put, does it not also have the potential to make you think?

In this essay I will use the example of one recent song that I find particularly relevant and significant to contemporary popular culture in order to demonstrate the philosophical worth of such an example within academic discourse. I will analyze the song through Heideggerian and Nietzschean philosophical lenses in order to demonstrate how one can entirely dispose of the hierarchy that exists in art theory. By proving its worth as a work of art, I will prove that the subjectivity of determining the value of art is entirely valueless, unproductive, and irrelevant to art consumption, as any work of art can have the potential to be worthy of analysis. I recommend listening to the song alone first, then watching the music video that accompanies it, then listening once more while reading the lyrics, before continuing to read (refer to Appendix B for lyrics).

The song itself, “XO TOUR LLif3” by Lil Uzi Vert, a rapper whose identity as a Black man from northern Philadelphia functions as a foil against more typical identities in art theory, combines thematic elements of both deep personal significance for the artist and wider significance in the public sphere. It was released in February of 2017 to critical acclaim and overwhelming popularity, bringing Lil Uzi Vert, a formerly relatively well-known rapper (depending on what circles listeners run in—he was incredibly popular already to some, and completely unknown of to others), to the level of celebrity. The song peaked at number 7 on the US Billboard Hot 100, and the first music video—one of three total—reached 290 million views

(two of the three music videos are now unlisted following the release of the official music video). While the song incorporates tropes commonly found in rap music, such as money, drugs, and women, the darker connotations that come with their inclusion deepen the song's meaning, and differentiate it from most other songs that come from the same genre and have a comparable level of popularity. Its undeniably philosophical implications combined with its widespread popularity result in a bizarre phenomenon— a collective externalization of mankind's primal anxiety regarding death, expressed in the context of concerts, parties, and popular culture. The few lyrics that a listener understands without reading along are haunting in their dismal sincerity; the song tackles drug abuse, suicide, and life's finitude with a kind of unexpected rawness—an expression of despair that is simultaneously individual and universal. You don't have to know the lyrics to feel the song the way it is meant to be felt; one only needs to hear the desperation in Uzi's voice and the ethereal opening notes in order to feel the song, in the simplest of terms. Its universally accessible tone, paired with Uzi's sincere words of anguish, make it a song that arguably has the potential to be timeless.

## II. A Brief Summary of the First Ten Chapters of *The Birth of Tragedy*

Before delving into a Nietzschean analysis of "XO TOUR Llif3," one must first understand the formative elements of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche advocates for Greek tragedy as the ultimate form of artistic expression, and explains the elements with which Greek tragedy is formed. Though Nietzsche later contradicted his own ideas in the book, claiming it was poorly written, disorganized, and so on, the ideas within it still stand today as an enthralling perspective on artistic expression and analysis of Greek tragedy, not to mention on existence itself.

The basis of his argument was formed around a belief in the artistic duality of Apollo and Dionysus. According to Nietzsche, “the Greeks knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence” (*The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 23). Nietzsche saw the ancient Greeks as a sensitive and passionate people, and believed that in order to cope with their sensitivity to the “horrors of existence,” they created the Olympian gods to act as a shield between them and the terrifying truth of finitude. The god Apollo is the god of the sun, a figure representative of image and representation, and therefore a symbol of the gods themselves, who act as reflections of humanity. The god Dionysus is the god of festivity. He symbolizes primal vitality and the exposure to raw, universal truth that comes with intoxication. Nietzsche argued that these two gods, or, to speak more abstractly, drives, act as two sides of the same coin—a balance necessary in order to keep human beings able to confront and grapple with the finitude of their own existence.

As Nietzsche describes, the “essence of the Dionysiac” can be found in the combination of the “enormous horror which seizes people when they suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world” and the “blissful ecstasy that arises from the innermost ground of man whenever this breakdown occurs” (17). This sensation arises most commonly from a state of intoxication—whether this is through alcohol or drugs, or through something like the “lust for life” that human beings find themselves in when spring flowers begin to bloom. Collective intoxication is the primary element of the Dionysiac state—it allows people to discard their subjective self-awareness in favor of a more primal, unified sensation of collectivity. The Dionysiac condition is characterized by throngs of people, such as in choruses or during festivals—through the loss of subjectivity that comes with intoxication, humanity bonds together in primal unity: “singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a



higher community...man has become a work of art” (18). Man is no longer creating images to represent sensation based on subjective experience—man has *become* sensation in itself. Man *is* art, through a collective expression of passionate vitality. Man rises above his individual experience to make room for the eternal and universal. The unity of the Dionysiac state inevitably fosters joy and solidarity amongst those involved. With the unbridled joy of harmony, however, there also must come the horror of universal truth. The bond that grows amongst all human beings through Dionysiac consciousness is the bond of existence itself, but by confronting existence, one must simultaneously confront the inevitable end of such an existence. Thus arises the horror of finitude. While the Dionysiac drive is a joyful one, it must also be a terrible one. It speaks the truth—horrifyingly so. Nietzsche uses the Greek myth of Silenus to demonstrate an example of the sensation of Dionysiac horror. In it, King Midas finds the demon Silenus and asks, “What is the best and most excellent thing for human beings?” Silenus is silent until he erupts with a piercing cackle and responds: “Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon” (23). Thus, in order to grapple with the terrifying truth that Silenus so bluntly states, humanity must invent ways to simplify it, to break it down—and here is the root and necessity of Apolline art.

The Apolline consciousness, as it is a representational one, is subjective and individualistic. An awareness of self is essential to the Apolline consciousness, and as Nietzsche argues, this “image must include that measured limitation, that freedom from wilder impulses, that wise calm of the image-making god” (16). With knowledge of self comes an acute sense of responsibility, and therefore of restriction and limitation. The Apolline consciousness “hides the

Dionysiac world...like a veil” (21). From these Apolline drives, Nietzsche argues, has come the fruition and necessity of the “naive artist.” Nietzsche states that “the naive in art” is “the supreme effect of Apolline culture;” naive art must “overthrow the Titans and slay the monsters,” before “employing powerful delusions and intensely pleasurable illusions” to “gain victory over a terrifyingly profound view of the world” (24). Here, the Titans and monsters are Apolline *representations* of suffering and horror, concepts that human beings become aware of through Dionysiac intoxication and loss of self. Thus, the Apolline acts as a response to the Dionysiac, in that it helps humanity cope with the horrors of existence. The naive artist, therefore, is one who fosters illusion, one who creates images and semblances that may *reflect* our own experience of existence, but cannot—and should not, for that would defeat their purpose—ever *replicate* it. Nietzsche continues by comparing the necessity of naive art to the necessity of the act of dreaming. He argues that with the primordial unity that arises from the state of Dionysiac intoxication, humanity strives toward its release through semblance—in other words, through imagery and representation. Just as human beings need naive art as a form of semblance, so the realm of “ecstatic vision” is necessary, as a way to release and redeem the terror that arises from a confrontation of the eternal suffering that human beings are condemned to and unified by through collective existence. However, the measured imagery of Apolline art pales in comparison with the overwhelming rawness of Dionysiac art—a gargantuan, unmeasured, infinite cry of passion. While solely Apolline art is representational at best, that of the Dionysiac consciousness is a direct expression of human vitality. The true, raw passion and suffering of existence, argues Nietzsche, can exist only within art driven by the Dionysiac—the “imageless art of music.” Within representational art, however, the two must coexist in order to allow for the release of primordial unity in a way that can be both expressed and consumed.

The need for a balance between the Dionysiac and the Apolline in art is clear— without the Apolline, Dionysiac art would have no organizational aspect to it, and therefore no way to be seen properly, to be analyzed, to be discussed. It would be overwhelming in its brutality, and impossible to consume. And it would lack that which makes existence possible to grapple with: the breaking down of humanity into digestible pieces through semblance, which, though nevertheless artificial, allows us to understand ourselves on a level that can be grasped more tangibly. Dionysiac art, when lacking aspects of the Apolline drive, finds its strength in passion, but its complete lack of subjectivity makes it difficult to consume. Nevertheless, the Dionysiac drive is crucial to the vitality that exists in good (loaded term as that is) art. Without the Dionysiac, art would be simply mundane: Nietzsche describes Apolline “music” (although, as he argues, music is technically only a Dionysiac expression due to its lack of imagery) as characterized by a “wave-like rhythm with an image-making power which [was] developed to represent Apolline states” (21). Artistic expression that only uses the Apolline drive is created with a certain utilitarianism—it has an explicit purpose—and therefore it is inevitably lackluster. Nietzsche uses the necessity of this duality to argue that the supremacy of Greek tragedy as artistic expression is a result of its equal balance of Apolline and Dionysiac drives.

Nietzsche dictates how the most crucial element of a Greek tragedy is the chorus of satyrs, which acts as the “only *seer* of the visionary world on stage” (42). In a Greek tragedy, the chorus speaks directly to the audience, while simultaneously taking part in the story itself. It acts as both participant and spectator. The chorus is made of satyrs, woodland gods or spirits that serve as companions of Dionysus. Stereotypically lustful and perpetually intoxicated, satyrs are a symbol of the Dionysiac drive. The satyr renders a “primal image of man,” or “man’s true nature” on stage, and therefore acts as a “living wall against the onslaught of reality” (41)— here, with

“reality,” Nietzsche refers to the false reality of the “cultured man.” He argues that with the “deceitful finery” of our invented culture, mankind ignores truth—primordial truth, the eternal suffering that mankind must endure. But the image of the satyr discards this so-called reality and unites us as mankind, suffering and rejoicing together, by representing mankind in his most primal state. The satyr is not a man—he is the first man, he is man and nature, intertwined at the core. Although the satyr is a mythical creature, he conveys the “genuine truth of nature” as opposed to the “cultural lie which pretends to be the only reality” (41). Nietzsche compares this opposition to the juxtaposition of the “eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself” with the “entire world of phenomena” (41). The chorus of satyrs, as a representation of the true essence of primal man, therefore *pulls* the audience into the performance. While in an Attic tragedy the chorus exists outside of the performance, and is therefore united with the audience on a superficial level (i.e., it is on the same level as the audience, in the orchestra, and watches the performance as an entity outside of the performance itself), in the essential Greek tragedy, the chorus of satyrs is both spectator and participant. The audience feels a primal connection to the chorus, which serves as a reflection of the audience, and thus the chorus allows the audience to become participatory in a more tangible way—the audience is *drawn in* rather than simply observing. As the chorus participates in the performance, so it invites the audience to participate through the primal connection it instills. Thus, the chorus of satyrs exemplifies Dionysiac primordial unity and instills in Greek tragedy a profound capability to connect with the audience. Without the discharge of this Dionysiac emotion through Apolline imagery, however, this connection would be impossible. While the essence of the satyr is and must be Dionysiac, there must be an expression of this essence through Apolline *semblance* in order for the audience to view and comprehend it on a collective and primal level. This balance is crucial to understanding why

Greek tragedy, Nietzsche argues, is the ultimate form of artistic expression.

### III. The Balance of Dionysus and Apollo Featured in Lil Uzi Vert's "Xo Tour Llif3"

The haunting first notes of "XO TOUR Llif3," an intertwining of eerily twinkling melodies, set the tone for the rest of the song. A sudden beat, low but forceful, interrupts as Lil Uzi Vert declares: "I don't really care if you cry / On the real you should've never lied / Should've saw the way she looked me in my eye / She said 'baby, I am not afraid to die' / Push me to the edge, all my friends are dead."

These opening lyrics act as a verbal representation of the essence of the song. Uzi, with his lyrics, immediately communicates to the listener that this song is clearly about death. However, it is not through language that he instills in the listener the same unshakeable sensation of anxiety that he himself feels. The atmosphere of the piece comes from the tone and musicality of not only the production, but also the voice of Uzi himself. Though the song begins coherently, it quickly devolves into what is now being labeled "mumble rap"—a subsection of rap music that is characterized by unintelligible words. Uzi slurs his words together to the point where the listener cannot understand what he is singing. He eventually reaches the tone of a high pitched cry, one which evokes a certain type of deep emotion, more profound than language can communicate.

As the listener, we are invited into his dream world, and we see it represented through the rawness of his essence, a rawness that inevitably evokes in us a certain unity. Through the song's dreamlike quality, paired with the ethereal imagery of the music video, Uzi creates his own universe—literally, with the line "I cannot die because this my universe." The video, an essential aspect of the song's release, features Uzi wandering around city streets (the video was filmed in

the 10th arrondissement of Paris), but beyond that, it uses special effects, lighting, and makeup that evoke an ethereal dream-state—bright pink and purple skies, mythical imagery, fake blood, religious iconography, iris-less eyes, and even an explicit reference to Uzi's own death: one of the last shots of the video is a gravestone with his name on it. The visual elements of the video all combine to present Uzi's universe to us, the audience. Uzi shows us his own Apolline dream-world, a "semblance of a semblance" (26), through the images and concepts that he communicates visually and with language. And the world he creates is both joyful and devastating—it is beautiful to consume, but its brutality is terrifying.

As Nietzsche argues, the ecstasy of the Dionysiac state induced by intoxication leads to a loss of will: "knowledge kills action" (40). The Dionysiac condition proposes a danger for any sense of will or action, instead resulting in a state of lethargy and revulsion as a response to a revelation of raw truth—Uzi, for example, experiences this lethargy through his "commitment" to Xanax, a prescription drug used to treat anxiety and panic-related disorders. Nevertheless, man still inherently longs for action, a release of the Dionysiac condition, and Apolline art provides the solution to this need: the redirection of this revulsion into representational art, through which man can grapple with truth. This redirection manifests itself in two kinds of representational art: the sublime, through which the "terrible is tamed by artistic means," and the comical, through which "disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means" (40). Uzi makes use of the sublime through the performance of the song's tragic elements, but his public persona demonstrates the comical—in public, his image is uniquely whimsical, fostering a sense of the individual behind the objectivity of his suffering.

Furthermore, Uzi's public image and performance serve the same purpose as the chorus of satyrs crucial to Greek tragedy. In Greek tragedy, the presence of a chorus of satyrs is essential

to maintaining the balance between Dionysiac and Apolline consciousness. The satyr is a manifestation of Dionysus, and he exists in Greek tragedy as an image-based Apolline representation. In “XO TOUR Llif3,” Uzi himself acts as the chorus of satyrs. He is primal and raw in his depiction of human suffering—but nevertheless remains a depiction. He *performs* as himself, presenting his essence and that of universal human suffering with the use of Apolline image-making. The experience of watching him perform the song live evokes the same sensations as watching the satyr reflect man on stage. He is performing for you while existing within his own world, separate from the deceitful world of invented culture. He literally invites his audience to sing along, and through this performance he draws you into his world, as you see yourself in the deepest essence of mankind that he expresses through representation. This reflection is not a subjective one—rather, it is a reflection of the primordial core of man, just as the satyr is. Uzi loses himself in his performative representation of man’s eternal primal anxiety, and we as the audience lose ourselves through him. Uzi evokes a sense of Dionysiac objectivity in his audience, separating them from the subjectivity of invented culture, by allowing the audience to see themselves reflected in his performance as primordial mankind.

This loss of subjectivity is further evoked by the influence of Dionysiac intoxication. Intoxication is a key element of the song, not only thematically, as Uzi candidly addresses his own drug addiction, but also in the act of listening to the song. As a popular rap song that increased in celebrity quite quickly, it is played at parties, performed at concerts, and covered quite frequently (it even briefly had a relatively viral video challenge connected with it). It exists in the abstract realm of the public, and through its widespread popularity the act of listening to it is a collective one. It is easy to lose oneself in the song, as it makes you forget yourself—Uzi repeats “all my friends are dead, push me to the edge” in endless loops, a cyclical verbalization

of devastating clarity that leaves the listener in deep contemplation: what exactly does the edge look like? This loss of self is further increased through the contexts in which the song is collectively listened to: primarily at parties and Lil Uzi Vert concerts. While the song in itself is intoxicating, it is also commonly, and most likely meant to be, listened to while intoxicated. Within the contexts of parties and concerts, everyone present knows the words to the hook and the chorus. The act of singing along, of crying out in the joy and suffering of primordial unity, is reminiscent of the Greek festivals of which Nietzsche speaks in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Unity casts off individuality in favor of collective existence and intoxication. We quite literally are *all* singing about the inevitability of death and the anxiety that comes with it. We lose ourselves within the song and become one collective mankind, dancing and singing in terror and joy. We all know Uzi's suffering, because we are all Uzi, in that we all must suffer through each day until we finally, inevitably, reach the edge. Until then, we release this suffering through the consumption and production of representational art, because we must, just as Lil Uzi Vert does.

Nietzsche also emphasizes that music is the art of the Dionysiac consciousness, and that melody is inherently Dionysiac, in that it is a more primal form of expression than language. Language acts as Apolline representation, a purely one-dimensional image of the core, which is to say the very being itself, that yearns for semblance. Nevertheless, language is necessary in order to render, with concepts and Apolline imagery, the essence of mankind, which is our eternal anxiety in the face of inevitable finitude. In "XO TOUR Llif3," the lyrics are not the primary aspect of the song, as evident by the way in which they blend together and become incomprehensible at points. The listener can rarely differentiate between lines about money and lines about the finitude of our existence, and this is clearly purposeful. Uzi communicates his anxiety not through words but through the music that the words create—his voice acts largely as



an instrument of sound, and it evokes a profound feeling of unity with the listener. Even so, the haunting sincerity of his lyrics is unavoidable and crucial to the song. The words are dark and genuine, and necessary in order to represent the essence of the song. But they are merely a *rendition* of the song's core. His lyrics cannot express his suffering alone, essential as they are to the formation of the song. It is *through* the lyrics, which mark certain points throughout the song, that the listener can then access the *essence* of the song, which is found in the atmosphere that the music itself creates. In the beginning of the song, we hear Uzi talk about his girlfriend's brush with death, and her willingness to face it, and we understand the concept of the song as a confrontation of life's inevitable finitude. It's not until later, though, that we truly feel his suffering, as his words turn into cries and blend together, instilling in the listener a feeling of primal connection. The first verse focuses on establishing that he has money, that he is successful, but the music behind it, the soft whine with which the song gradually opens that continues throughout, creates a constant tone of atmospheric eeriness that cannot be shaken. Nietzsche states that music "has no *need* at all of images and concepts but merely *tolerates* them as accompaniment" (36). In "XO TOUR Llif3," the words only ever act as representation for the feelings that the music communicates. The lack of coherency is one of the elements that makes the song what it is, a uniquely primal expression of primordial suffering.

#### IV. A Transition to Heideggerian Existentialism

"XO TOUR Llif3" is not only an artistic work that instills in its listeners Dionysiac primordial unity through Apolline semblance—it is also an expression of Uzi's own experience with existential anxiety. The use of Dionysiac and Apolline drives in the song is essential for Uzi to be capable of releasing his internal, though universal, struggle with finitude—but what exactly

provoked the initial discovery of this struggle? The confrontation of death is the most primal and essential component of man's suffering, but it has been suppressed by centuries of invented culture and societal structure—it must be instigated by something in order to come into fruition. Man is distracted from the terrors of finitude by society; as man now functions within the systems of his civilization, systems that are meant to numb us from the pain of existence, the revelation of and subsequent anxiety regarding our own finitude must be initiated by a certain state or situation. In order to understand the provocation that induced a need for this song's release, we must first understand how a being exists within the world, in an existential context, and therefore how a being can be brought to a state of existential anxiety. Following the onslaught of such an anxiety, we must also wonder—how can one grapple with it? Lil Uzi Vert inadvertently uses Dionysiac and Apolline drives as a method to instill a connection with the listener, and it is through this connection that he can communicate, with a combination of the lyrics and the music, the turmoil he experiences after being forced to confront the near-death of his girlfriend, and the anxiety that follows this confrontation. But it is in his methods of grappling with this anxiety that we see, externalized, his inability to find meaning in existence. Uzi searches for meaning by attempting to escape the terror of finitude, but, as we will see through a Heideggerean perspective, a being cannot escape its own finitude. In fact, its own finitude is the one thing that ever truly belongs to it.

While the Dionysiac and Apolline elements of the song explain how exactly it has been manifested in the form in which we find it, and why it has the ability to move and unsettle the listener on a primal level, the existential and phenomenological implications of the song remain to be unpacked. These elements are crucial to our understanding of the song as an expression of existential anxiety. In order to grasp this anxiety, we must understand Heidegger's perception of

a being's existence as being-towards-death, and the implications that come with it.

## V. A Brief Explanation of Authenticity and Being-Towards-Death

We can begin to understand Martin Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of the experience of being in the world by understanding his creation of the word "Dasein," which can be translated literally as "to be there" or "being there"—taken from the German words "Da" ("there") and "Sein" ("being" or "to be"). In academic discourse, translators have historically left the word untranslated, a practice that continues today, in order for it to retain its core meaning without the potential for misinterpretation.

For Heidegger, Dasein is characterized essentially by the inseparability of the "to be," or "being," and the "there"—Dasein is always a being-in-the-world, a "being there." Dasein exists not as a subjective individual but as a part of the collective experience of living in the world. The "there," the environment in which the being exists, the structure it is surrounded by, is crucial to and inseparable from the being itself. While Dasein must have a sense of ownership over itself, which is characterized by its own finitude, it simultaneously must belong to the world in which it exists, because this world is what dictates Dasein's potentiality-for-being. A person who lives in present-day New York cannot be a medieval shoemaker in Paris, because they do not live spatially or temporally in that world. Their occupation is one potentiality that influences their very being—their Dasein—and therefore cannot be separated from their being. To Heidegger, "to be" is not a static condition, but rather an action—it is a continual state of active understanding and re-understanding the world that one is surrounded by. It is not to be found within the "mind" or the "soul," because these supposedly internal aspects of identity too are swayed by external influences, and therefore can never truly exist without them. Our

development as a being-in-the-world is based on the activity that surrounds us, so it cannot be solely internal.

Heidegger describes himself as a phenomenologist rather than an existentialist, though his philosophy does center around the existential significance of human finitude.

Phenomenology, according to him, attempts to understand the world not through science, which blocks our view of experience by focusing only on productivity and so-called knowledge, but through experience itself. As he puts it, “‘phenomenology’ means to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (*Being and Time*, p. 58).

In other, more comprehensible terms, phenomenology allows us to understand our own visible experience through this very experience. Science has the potential to threaten the meaningfulness of the world, by breaking it down not into *what* we experience and *how* we experience it, but into that which we *cannot* experience directly, such as neutrons and electrons, or planets billions of lightyears away from us. Phenomenology, however, *relies* on the meaningfulness of that which we directly experience as being-in-the-world, as Dasein. We must first see and experience things in order to understand and interpret them. For Heidegger, the act of understanding is not cognitive or analytical, but rather more bodily, a result of how bodies directly relate to objects. It cannot be found in the brain, but rather in the activity and phenomenological interpretation that result from our being “thrown” into the world, and therefore being forced to experience it through no choice of our own.

Heidegger describes this condition as “thrownness.” Thrownness is Dasein’s “subjection to the ‘there’” (Wrathall 32), the state of being “thrown” into the world in which we exist.

Dasein does not ask to be born into the world, and yet it finds itself there, experiencing, interpreting, and being influenced by the structures surrounding it. Through being in the world,

we find ourselves in this world in a particular way—we have no control over the way in which the world is arranged or disposed. Even so, Dasein’s existence has the potential to belong to itself, despite the lack of control resulting from our thrownness. By taking responsibility for the reality into which Dasein is thrown, Dasein can achieve *eigentlichkeit*, or “ownness.” Heidegger argues that the way to achieve ownness is through living “authentically,” by which he means acknowledging that which can only belong to oneself—one’s own finitude.

Authenticity in the Heideggerian sense entails seizing responsibility for one’s own Dasein. The confrontation of finitude, and the anticipation of which that follows it, allows Dasein to be free to “authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities lying ahead of that possibility [death] which is not to be outstripped” (59). As a being thrown into the world, the only thing which belongs to me is my own end—no other Dasein will ever experience it. Heidegger argues that one must live and act based on this very realization, in order to live a life as authentically as possible. The inevitability of death is a bleak concept to confront at first, but Heidegger retains that it can be used as a way to seize ownership of oneself. My finitude belongs to me and me alone, and therefore my life belongs to me and me alone. By taking responsibility for one’s own Dasein, one can experience life to the fullest extent, unbothered by the structures of conformity fostered in the greater public sphere, or as Heidegger calls it, *das Man*.

*Das Man* is the “they.” It describes the role that the social relations within the public world play in influencing who we are as Daseins. As Heidegger argues, “the world of Dasein is a with-world” (53). Dasein exists not subjectively, but collectively; being-with-others proves the collective existence of other Daseins. This collective existence must function within some form of structure in order to exist. *Das Man* formulates the structure for a world of chaos, of endless

Daseins existing with and among each other. The conformity that *das Man* fosters is a basis upon which we are able to make choices for ourselves, and therefore the act of conformity to any specific extent is nearly impossible to avoid. Heidegger sees the tendency to conform as an essential part of being human, a structure around which we can form our activity and day-to-day lives. Within any given society, there are rules, both spoken and unspoken. Conforming to these rules is not necessarily a terrible thing because they are necessary in providing a foundation upon which we can make other, more significant decisions. They make the easy decisions for us.

Without *das Man*, I would have to actively decide every single thing that is normally dictated to me by societal structures—I already know to wear clothes because of the way our society functions, so it isn't necessary for me to make that decision every day, which, combined with all of the minute decisions that I do not have to make, gives me the headspace and time to make other, more important decisions.

Too much conformity, however, leads to a life lived inauthentically. By allowing *das Man* to make *all* of one's decisions, one avoids taking responsibility for their own Dasein, and therefore cannot live authentically. Conformity is necessary to a certain extent, but if all of one's decisions are dictated by *das Man*, they will lose the ownership they have over their Dasein. A hyperawareness of *das Man* can lead to what Heidegger calls "distantiality" or "disburdening," the act of distancing oneself from one's Dasein. Dasein is subjected to the public world around it, as it is perpetually intertwined with and inseparable from this world. Therefore, it has the potential to lose itself within what Heidegger calls the "dictatorship" of *das Man*. The Dasein which lives authentically is merely a modification of the "one," of the collective *das Man*; it, of course, must function within certain structures, however significant or minuscule they may be, as it is also part of *das Man* through collective existence, but it also can obtain the freedom to

choose among existing potentialities-of-being through seizing responsibility and ownership of its own finitude. Dasein, after confronting its own finitude, must grasp it and then act based upon it, comport itself towards it, in order to live authentically. Otherwise, its being is lost among the collective complacency regulated by *das Man*.

A being that comports itself towards death is what Heidegger would call a being-towards-death; a Dasein is a being-towards-death when it acknowledges and confronts the inevitability of death. This comporting results in that primal terror and anxiety which is the essence of primordial man. According to Heidegger, existential anxiety cannot be relieved in any tangible way, as there is no definitive ideal of how to live one's life; however, a being that comports itself towards death then gains the freedom to explore all potentialities-for-being. This freedom is why, Heidegger argues, it is essential to comport oneself towards death in any and all pursuits of potentiality-for-being. It is through living as being-towards-death and exploring potentiality-for-being that Dasein can then pursue a life of authenticity; nevertheless, with the potential for authenticity also inevitably comes the potential for conformity. Dasein can comport itself towards death and still live inauthentically, by avoiding the ownness of its existence and conforming to the standards of *das Man* as an attempt to relieve the pain of existential anxiety. It is not enough to solely confront finitude and comport oneself towards one's eventual demise; a being-towards-death must then also actively pursue authenticity in order to find meaning in their existence. It is this very ability that makes us who we are—it is through our ability to confront our own finitude and pluck meaning from it that distinguishes us, as Daseins, from other living things.

VI. Elements of Authenticity and the Influence of *das Man* In “Xo Tour Llif3”

Although “XO TOUR Llif3” utilizes elements of authentic expression, Uzi himself, as a being-towards-death, does not seem to be living authentically in the Heideggerian sense. As evidenced by the lyrics of the song, Uzi feels ambivalent towards death; though he acknowledges it and the anxiety that comes with its confrontation, he doesn’t seem to then move forward after said acknowledgement by taking ownership of his Dasein’s finitude, as Heidegger encourages. After confronting the reality of death head-on through his girlfriend’s brush with death, Uzi’s reaction is to live inauthentically—using money, drugs, and other vices to escape his anxiety and inner suffering. He loses himself in the throes of *das Man*, and he does not seem to care whether or not he dies. In fact, he even declares, “I cannot die because this my universe.” He lives in his own world, and though he knows that he must confront the reality of finitude, a confrontation that he has seen reflected in those around him, to him death theoretically would act as merely an extension of the universe in which he already lives. He does not feel the need to confront it on an essential level; in fact, he flatly rejects it. Uzi attempts to face death with apathy—one way he copes with death-related anxiety—rather than authenticity. The line “push me to the edge” demonstrates this nonchalance with passively suicidal connotations; the moment when he dies is not important to him, and he seems to understand that he has the potential to die at any given moment. The very first line, “I don’t really care if you cry,” establishes from the beginning this notion of apathetic numbness. In the song, he never explicitly verbalizes the anxiety that he experiences; rather, he faces death with passivity. In another line, when his voice peaks in the first verse, his indifference towards death is demonstrated by him saying “she say I’m insane, yeah/I might blow my brains out.” The line is slurred, with almost a wailing tonality, so that the listener cannot understand exactly what Uzi is saying; this lack of sonic clarity further emphasizes the vagueness of the line itself: is she saying he might blow his brains out, or is he



saying it? The potential haziness of the line's meaning further emphasizes the way in which Uzi comports himself towards the anxiety related to death, through apathy as avoidance. He does not actively want to die, but he does not seem to actively want to live either. Maybe he will blow his brains out; it seems to be as unclear to him as it is to his girlfriend and the listener, and he faces this possibility by numbing himself to it. By not caring about life or death, by being numb towards either possibility, Uzi avoids responsibility for himself. His own life—his being-in-the-world—no longer belongs to him.

Even when facing death with attempted apathy, however, Uzi cannot truly escape the terror of his finitude. This anxiety makes itself known not through the lyrics, but through Uzi's tone of voice and the atmosphere of the song. Although his words communicate a kind of nonchalance towards the possibility of death, for much of the song he sings with a high-pitched cry that evokes the kind of terror that belongs only to a being which stands on the edge of the void of finitude. Uzi's anxiety as a being-towards-death is a universal one, rooted in the realization that the arbitrary structures and norms *das Man* has created are neither essential nor timeless, and that we are able to pursue that potentiality-for-being which will allow us to find meaning in our existence. In the face of this great, terrifying freedom, Dasein can throw itself into it or recoil from it, and the ability to make this choice is what distinguishes Dasein as Dasein, as being-in-the-world. Uzi has chosen the latter option, a retreat into the easy structures of *das Man*, as an attempt to escape the great void of existential terror which, once acknowledged, can never truly be escaped.

Uzi's succumbing to *das Man* is evident through his reliance on money as a way to relieve pain. In the line "all my friends are dead," Uzi makes use of a double entendre to verbalize his loneliness. In one sense, he is speaking literally; in other songs, he raps about his

hometown friends from north Philadelphia who have been killed, and in interviews, Uzi frequently likes to claim that he has no real friends due to his increasing celebrity and affluence. Another understanding of the line, revealed by the song's producer, TM88, is that it refers to "dead presidents," which is slang for money. Uzi's loneliness and solitude has resulted in his relying on his only friends: dollar bills. Throughout the song, he flaunts his money as evidence of his success. The flaunting of wealth is a common thematic element in rap music, among other genres, as a result of the culture from which it comes. Money rules cultures based in capitalism, exemplified by that of the United States; the entire culture revolves around ways to earn money, not just in order to live comfortably, but beyond that—to be wealthy. To be successful, you must be wealthy. Uzi demonstrates the insidious influence of *das Man* through his reliance on money as a way to provide happiness. He searches for meaning in the products he can buy and the jewelry he can wear, rather than finding it in authenticity, as Heidegger would recommend.

Furthermore, Uzi uses drugs, specifically Xanax, as a way to "numb the pain." Rather than facing the truth of existential finitude, Uzi recoils back from it, wishing not to feel it. He literally begs: "Please, xanny make it go away" ("xanny" being slang for Xanax). Xanax, too, acts as a manifestation of the dictatorship of the "one," or *das Man*, by instilling a sensation of numbness. Uzi insists, "I'm committed, not addicted, but it keep controlling me." His inauthenticity manifests itself as denial—in that he does not admit to his own addiction—but it is also not in his control. He is addicted to being numb, a sensation instilled by the lethargic state of submission to *das Man*. Uzi loses himself in the throes of the "one," the structures that have been set in place to crush authenticity and ease the pain of existential terror.

Even so, the fact that Uzi released this song at all could potentially be seen as a demonstration of authentic living. A song with such a level of raw honesty in its expression of

inner turmoil is difficult to find in the Billboard Hot 100, and the style of the song itself is musically unique. The release of such a candid articulation into the public sphere of popular music, a realm that generally does not promote music that so sincerely addresses death, is a risky one. Perhaps it is this very riskiness that has propelled the song, and Uzi himself, forward into celebrity status. The song is unexpected in its style and content, and it is the surprise that comes with the listener's first time hearing the atmospheric melody and the haunting lyrics that initially makes it so powerful and moving. While Uzi's performance as himself in the content of the song demonstrates his living inauthentically, the release of the song itself is a demonstration of authentic artistic expression. It is this very authenticity that has allowed it to gain widespread critical acclaim, from music critics and teenagers at parties alike. It is successful in spite of *das Man*, though it is because of *das Man* that it has the ability to even be released. Its existence within certain structures—the world of the music industry, for example, specifically popular music, specifically rap music—is what allows it to be consumed by and readily available to the public, but its authenticity is what allows it to connect as profoundly as it does to the public, both collectively and on an individual level. Yes, we can listen to it on Apple Music, and his associations with celebrities (the song title, for example, is a reference to his touring with The Weeknd, a wildly popular singer who is also featured in the music video) and presence as a celebrity himself makes it difficult to avoid listening to it, but the reason we *continue* to listen, and *enjoy* listening, after having first accessed it is a result of its sincerity, one that connects us to it on a profound level.

Nevertheless, its prominence in the public sphere leaves it now to the subjection of *das Man*. As *das Man* evolves, dictating what is acceptable in popular culture and daily life, will “XO TOUR Llif3” remain an example of authenticity in popular music? When I play it at my

53rd birthday party, will the guests dance—or will they complain of its datedness? The world of music, specifically popular music, is constantly evolving and redefining itself. Does the popularity of this song, and others that communicate similar themes and evoke a similar sort of collectivity in their audiences, indicate a rise in sincerity in popular music, a category generally reserved for music about the superficial aspects of having sex, doing drugs, and getting money? Regardless, today, at the very least, “XO TOUR Llif3” remains a profound example of sincere personal and objective truth through a representation of the essence of this truth.

## VII. Conclusion

It is difficult to imagine a world in which hierarchies do not exist, as our entire society is built upon hierarchy. Though we as individuals cannot begin to dismantle these hierarchies in one fell swoop, we can collectively question, and therefore disprove, them by breaking them down in order to understand the foundations on which they have been built. Then, we may shake these foundations to their core—only after this can we build new foundations of equality upon the remains of the old ones.

What makes a work of art worthy of critical discourse? It has been established that there is no technical definition of a work of art; the consumption of art is subjective, and every individual who looks at a work of art has the ability to decide for themselves whether or not they see it as art. Still, we have not yet successfully dismantled the structures that dictate what art is acceptable to analyze, and therefore discover meaning in. Academic and theoretical discourse is clearly restrictive and hierarchical in nature, as its history has been founded upon the ideas of primarily white men from similar social circles, ones who only had access to, and therefore the ability to critically discuss, the art from their contemporaries or the art that came before them.

Yet currently, the discourse of critical theory is still heavily biased towards analyses of, for example, classical music or Surrealist literature.

I propose a renewal of the standards which dictate “appropriate art.” The art through which we understand and express our experience as being in the world spans across all themes, all media, and all styles. There is no “appropriate art”—there is only art, and there will only be art. Though this art will evolve in its trends and themes, it will always remain art. Art is an essence; it cannot, nor can it ever, be defined strictly by the *representation* through which the essence is released. In order to call oneself a theorist, an academic, a philosopher, or an intellectual, one cannot possibly restrict oneself to only studying one “class” of art; though, if they do, they must also acknowledge and respect those “classes” of art which are suppressed by a system based in the subjugation of the oppressed and reject completely the notion of hierarchy in art consumption and theory. It is no longer enough to know about Duchamp’s *Fountain*—now, we must be able to collectively raise up art that reflects any and all of the many facets of our own contemporary existence.

Appendix A



Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917



Fig. 2. Yves Klein, *IKB Godet*, 1958

Sol LE WITT  
Born 1928, Hartford, Connecticut  
Lives in New York

PROPOSAL FOR WALL DRAWING, INFORMATION SHOW

Within four adjacent squares,  
each 4' by 4',  
four draftsmen will be employed  
at \$4.00/hour  
for four hours a day  
and for four days to draw straight lines  
4 inches long  
using four different colored pencils;  
9H black, red, yellow and blue.  
Each draftsmen will use the same color throughout  
the four day period,  
working on a different square each day.

73

Fig. 3. Sol LeWitt proposal for wall drawing, 1968



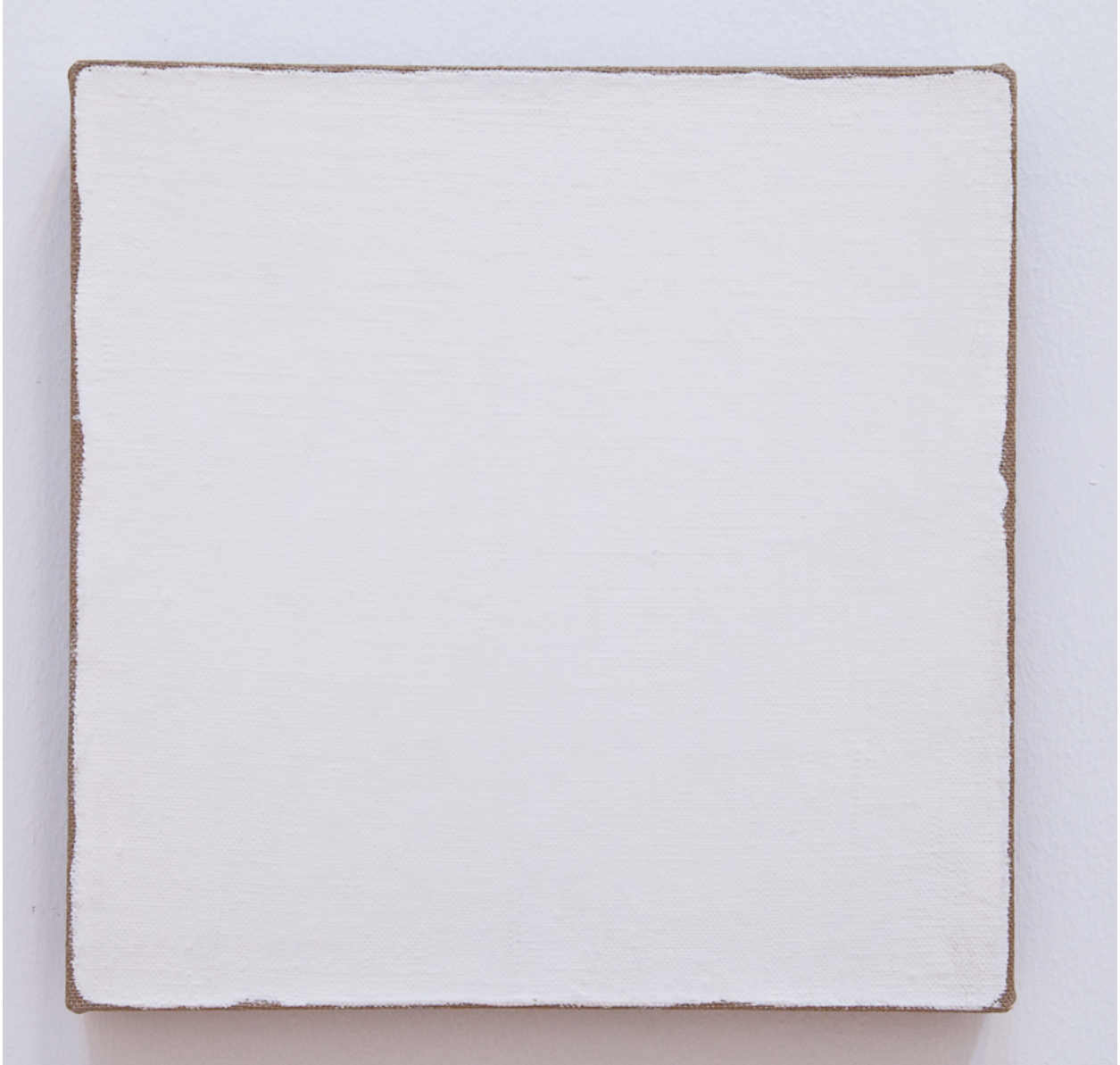


Fig. 4. Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, 1965

Fig. 5. Excerpt from “If I Told Him, A Completed Portrait of Picasso” by Gertrude Stein:

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him. Would he like it would  
Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it.

If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him  
if Napoleon. Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if  
Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he like it would he like it if I told him.

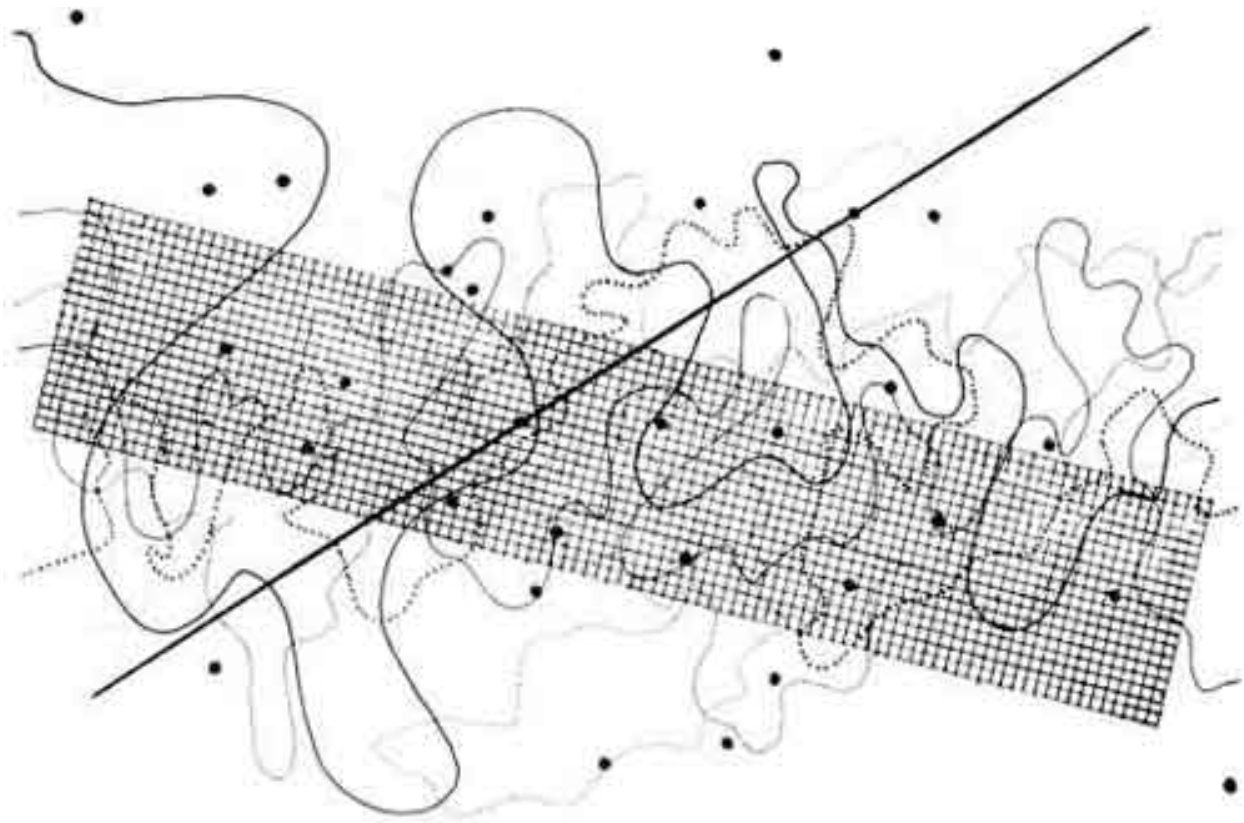


Fig. 6. John Cage, score for “Fontana Mix,” 1958

## Appendix B

Lyrics to "XO TOUR Llif3" by Lil Uzi Vert, 2017

You alright  
I'm alright  
I'm quite alright  
And my money's right, yeah

I don't really care if you cry  
On the real you should've never lied  
Should've saw the way she looked me in my eyes  
She said baby I am not afraid to, die

Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge

Phantom that's all red  
Inside all white  
Like something you ride a sled down  
I just want that head  
My Brittany got mad  
I'm really her man now  
Everybody got the same swag now  
One way that I trap now  
Stackin' my bands all the way to the top  
All the way 'til my bands fallin' over  
Every time that you leave your spot  
Your girlfriend call me like "Come on over"  
I like the way that she treat me  
Gon' leave you won't leave me, I call it that Casanova  
She said I'm insane yeah  
I might blow my brain out  
Xanny numb the pain yeah  
Please, Xanny make it go away  
I'm committed, not addicted but it keep controlling me

All that pain now I can't feel it, I swear that it's slowing me (yeah)

I don't really care if you cry  
On the real, you should've never lied  
Saw the way she looked me in my eyes  
She said I am not afraid to, die

All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead (yeah)  
All my friends are dead (yeah)

That is not your swag I swear you faking  
All these niggas wanna take my cake now  
Radar, at the store, radar  
Made somethin', look nigga take some  
Fast car, Nascar, race on  
In the club they got no ones, that we were baked now  
Clothes from overseas, got the racks and they all C-Notes, you is not a G though  
Look at you stackin' all your money, it ain't green though  
I was counting that and it's not 20, that's a zero

She say  
You're the worst, you're the worst  
I cannot die because this my universe

I don't really care if you cry  
On the real, you should've never lied  
Should've saw the way she looked me in my eyes  
She said baby I am not afraid to, die

Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge  
All my friends are dead  
Push me to the edge

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