

# **Social Evolution of Order Observation in Art**

Tuğba Gülal, Istanbul Aydın University, Turkey

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that authenticity, as a key dimension in the evolution of social dynamics, deserves focused analysis. Drawing on Moeller and D'Ambrosio's (2023) framework of sincerity, prolificity, and authenticity, I show how authenticity is uniquely positioned amid today's shifting identity formations. The concept of second-order observation (Luhmann, 1998) and the existential difference between pre-digital and post-digital paradigms highlight major changes in how social dynamics and self-presentation function. I will show how third-order observation, an often-overlooked layer, is crucial for understanding authentic self-expression and meaningful social evolution, particularly as revealed in art. Specifically, I analyze works by Osman Hamdi Bey, Caspar David Friedrich, Claude Monet, and La Robotte to contrast different observational paradigms and illustrate authenticity's relevance. Ultimately, I advocate for an authenticity-based approach to communication that moves beyond traditional constructivism to foster deeper, more genuine connections. The paper also explores the distinction between the infinite and finite nature of pre and post-digital art, clarifying its relevance to authenticity.

*Keywords:* authenticity, observation, art, prolificity

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## **Introduction**

The digital communication of our era has transformed the nature of interaction. This transformation is rooted in the idea of rethinking the future of humanity in a digitized world. In modern society, our future is closely tied to the concept of orientation, which highlights the significance of human orientation. According to Stegmaier,

In modern society, you cannot escape certain functional systems of communication; you must orient yourself to them: the systems of economics, politics, law, and, as far as it relates to these three (and more), mass media. On the contrary, you can decide whether or not to participate in science, art, or religio. (Stegmaier, 2016, p. 158)

Orientation highlights a phenomenological perspective focused on how individuals effectively navigate changing circumstances characterized by complexity, confusion, and uncertainty (Stegmaier, 2019). Furthermore, “human orientation is manifold.” In the context of art, Stegmaier discusses “artistic orientation,” which refers to an interest in specific means, objects, and styles of art (Stegmaier, 2019, p. 15). Through this lens, art serves as a form of orientation, similar to religious, moral, and sexual orientation, allowing individuals to express their perspectives in everyday life. Through artistic and scientific routines, humans differentiate themselves from animals, even though animals and plants may have their own forms of orientation. Nevertheless, art serves a specific function: it is about “transcending everyday practice” (Stegmaier, 2019, pp. 197-200). Human beings transcend routine through art, providing a means to navigate the individual, social, and political challenges they encounter. This engagement with art involves a dynamic interaction that is linked to communication with others. In essence, we orient ourselves in relation to and in communication with others, supporting the notion that art is a substantive form of orientation in interpersonal communication. Moreover, it reveals the essence of different individuals through the artistic elements it embodies. To explore how art reveals and transforms the identities of different beings, I will apply Luhmann’s concept of second-order observation, which involves the observation of observed entities. Before proceeding with this concept, I will explain Moeller & D’Ambrosio’s three relevant concepts: i) sincerity, ii) prolificity, and iii) authenticity. The notion of prolificity will be linked to Luhmann’s concept of second-order observation. Additionally, Section 2 will focus on various examples from art history to delve into the concept of authenticity, which opens a path to third-order observation.

## **On Three Different Modes of Identity**

Describing the term “authenticity” is complex, and it becomes even more challenging when considering the fast-changing dynamics of the digitized world and digital technologies. In their paper, “Orientation to Profiles: Identity in a Digitized World,” Moeller & D’Ambrosio (2023) suggest that “these technologies enhance a shift from authenticity, or inner-self-oriented identity, to prolificity, or profile-oriented identity” (p. 24). What do the terms authenticity and prolificity mean? Moeller & D’Ambrosio’s definitions will help clarify these concepts. They state: “We distinguish between three different modes of identity: sincerity shapes identity in orientation to social roles, authenticity shapes identity in orientation to an original self, and what we call ‘prolificity’ shapes identity in orientation to profiles” (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, 2023, p. 23). These three modes of identity represent different aspects of the changing dynamics of digital media and human orientation. Within the scope of this paper, these modes will be linked to art history and the evolution of art products.

Art products leave us with different observations, questions, and reflections. One of these implications is the way in which individual beings are exhibited and transformed through various art products, and how this is reflected in artistic orientations that reveal different identities. To elaborate on the relevant implication, three different modes of identity require further consideration. The concept of sincerity is more about the social roles we are engaged with and “sincere identification manifested in true devotion to a social role, could not only provide much needed orientation about what to do and why to do it, but also generate respect (*Achtung*)” (p. 36). For the concept of sincerity, social roles in Ancient Chinese thought and culture can be considered and “filial piety” in traditional Confucius texts is one of the key concepts of sincerity. Relevantly, Moeller & D’Ambrosio state that:

Philosophical texts from the Confucian tradition (such as the *Analects* of Confucius) tend to highlight just as much as popular treatises (such as the *24 Examples of Filial Piety*) that ‘esteem and fair repute’ are due to those who ‘live’ their roles *sincerely*, that is bodily, emotionally, and intellectually committed. They greatly praise dutiful sons, devoted wives, and loyal ministers. (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, 2023, p. 36)

The concept of sincerity encompasses a wide range of thoughts about individuals' belongings, which relate to the fulfillment of social roles within a given domain. For example, these social roles can tie us to family roles, nationality, or jobs, which lead a society to live in harmony and a balanced manner within the construction of their identities. The second mode of identity is authenticity, which plays a significant role in the scope of the paper.

The concept of authenticity is complex to define, and it is reflected in everyday interpersonal relations. As human beings, we tend to seek approval or love within our authentic selves, since it is ontologically more about us. When we alter the authentic aspects of our own being, it can be misleading or misguiding not only for others but also about ourselves. On the other hand, in a digitized world where communication can be more complex than ever and a role-based model of sincerity, it is not easy to determine the concept of authenticity and preserve it. Who is that original, authentic self? Although this question can be very philosophical and not directly related to the paper, in order to understand the concept of authenticity, it draws a line. Accordingly, “from an emerging perspective of authenticity, social roles appeared as merely staged and hiding an ‘original’ or ‘actual self’ underneath. To discover this true self, roles need to be discarded or disregarded” (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, *ibid.*, p. 38). The authentic self highlights the inner space of one's own being, while sincerity reflects the relationship between this inner space and social expectations and the public realm. Therefore, authenticity separates us from the outside world at some levels. By emphasizing this separation, Charles Taylor (1991) seems to define authenticity as follows:

The understanding of life which emerged with the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century gives a new importance to being true to oneself. What this consists in is the idea that each one of us has an original way of being human: each person has his or her own measure. There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this notion gives a new importance to originality: being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. (pp. 28–29)

In terms of modernity, Taylor explores the relationship between one's realization of their authentic self and various external influences. According to Charles Taylor (1991), the modern

ideal of authenticity arose from the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century. This view holds that each person has a unique way of being human and should strive to discover and live out this individuality, rather than conforming to externally imposed models from society, tradition, religion, or political authority (Taylor, *ibid*, pp. 28–29).

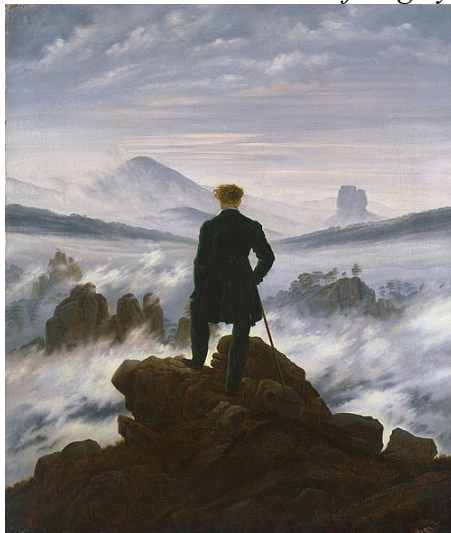
These impositions can vary in different contexts. For example, if you live in a very religious and conservative domain, the political and social authorities can impose on you the need to act within acceptable and suitable norms. The relevant authority can impose on you to act in a way that is justifiable in a given conservative domain, and this can be about how you dress, speak, and even with whom to marry. Different domains impose different models of imposition, and this can be linked to social positions such as gender, religion, class, and ethnicity.

In the modern world, any definition of authenticity can be complex and even deeply paradoxical, as stated by Moeller & D'Ambrosio. Authenticity can imply both originality and inoriginality since the authenticity is not fixed and it can be a kind of construction in a digitized world that can be defined by “reading novels, watching movies or hearing stories about authentic people” (Moeller & D'Ambrosia, *ibid.*, p. 40). This paradoxical aspect of authenticity needs to be kept in mind, as authenticity may not only be recognized by revealing the true self or discovering it, but also involves creating the relevant self. Nevertheless, what can be exempted from the concept of authenticity in relation to Romantic expressivism is its connection to one's own autonomous being to realize his or her own values and humanity, which has been emphasized by Taylor (1991) above. This humanity within authenticity can only be fulfilled by living and finding one's own; therefore, it is linked to autonomous being. Can we really become what we really are? This question is linked to the concept of authenticity and sincerity mentioned earlier, which poses a challenge to authenticity because sincerity ties us to external positions.

To understand the concept of authenticity as an autonomous being and follow the mentioned question, Casper David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (Friedrich, 1818), a particular example of Romantic period art, can be cited. This painting depicts a lone figure standing on a rocky precipice, gazing out over a sea of fog. The figure's posture and the vast, misty landscape convey a sense of individuality and self-discovery, aligning with Romantic expressivism and the concept of authenticity discussed earlier.

### Figure 1

*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich (1818)



Above, in the painting, a figure of a man stands upon a rocky precipice, and his back is to the viewer. He seems to gaze at the landscape with a blurry image, and the viewer can see and feel the uncertainty of the cloudy and misty landscape through the trees and mountains. From this uncertainty of landscape, a man's figure is vivid and stunning within his existential position and authentic being. From the subject's way of dressing, one may infer their position, class, or nationality; nevertheless, since contemplation of the subject is prominent, it is not clearly defined by external positions such as religion, which can be interpreted as a self-discovery of the central figure in the painting. Therefore, the concept of authenticity has a double-sided aspect, as it involves both the discovery and revelation of oneself, and remains paradoxical. The concept of authenticity will be called again later. For now, let me refer to the concept of proficity, which is the third mode of identity.

When they first introduce the concept of proficity, Moeller & D'Ambrosio mention "proficity or profile-oriented identity or its role in shaping identity in orientation to profiles" (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2023, pp. 23-24). Proficity refers to a profile-oriented identity that can be characterized by following a specific profile. They state If the "age of authenticity" was characterized by the pursuit of an original self, then the present age may be characterized by the pursuit of a profile—it is an "age of proficity" (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2023, p. 41). The distinction between the concepts of authenticity and proficity is an existentialist question to consider. To understand this existentialist difference through art and media, the concept of proficity requires further elaboration.

The concept of proficity refers to creating profiles to reshape identity. Within the scope of this paper, it is linked to the influential German social system theorist Luhmann's concept of "second-order observation." Second-order Observation, or simply Observation of Observation or observer(s), is a prevalent concept, particularly considering the sharp shift in digital media. Luhmann (1998) describes the concept as follows:

The Observation of the observers—that is, a shift from a consciousness of reality to a description of descriptions, or the perception of what others say or do not say—has become the advanced mode of perceiving the world in modern society. This is true in all major functional domains, in academia as much as in the economy, in art as well as in politics. (p. 100)

Luhmann, who is not only considered a social system theorist but also one of the influential new media theorists, emphasized the functional differentiation that the modern era has experienced. The transition from first-order Observation to second-order Observation becomes relevant in consideration of the transition from the modern era to the digital era. To illustrate the differences between first-order and second-order observations, one might consider the evolution of photography. When a photographer takes a photo of someone walking on the street or a beautiful landscape, it is a first-order observation in terms of the relationship between the photographer and the person or landscape being photographed. Observation is made by the first-order.

Nevertheless, second-order Observation is different in terms of the relevant relational dynamics between the photographer or someone who takes the photo and someone or thing whose photo is taken. For example, suppose someone takes a photo of a landscape, and another person takes a photo of that person trying to take a photo. In that case, this can be called a second-order Observation because it involves the Observation of an Observation. Moeller and D'Ambrosio states, "In the mode of second-order observation, we look at the world (including ourselves) in

terms of how it appears in the observations of others.” In the mode of second-order, a different dynamic of Observation occurs, in which we are engaged with the Observation of Observation or the Observation of observed one (s). The first transition is about the change in Observation. The second transition is about existential difference, and this is linked to being and seeing. According to Moeller and D’Ambrosio, second-order Observation is more complex than first-order Observation because “one must observe something and at the same time think about how it will be observed. *In second-order observation, we orient ourselves to the world (including ourselves) as it is seen by others*” (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, 2023, p. 42). Within the second-order Observation, the impression is kept with multi-layers of Observation, including the relation between seeing and being. Moeller & D’Ambrosio mention this as second-order following social media.

Influencers or academics can be some of the examples for this. Alternatively, even artists nowadays can be included in this.

Observation becomes a path, a habit, a routine, dependent on a ‘feed’ on the web (which is less static than a ‘site’), constantly extending further into the future, always leading followers, always anticipating. Observation turns into a dynamic relation between seeing and being, and something is seen as being followed, and then the followers are being followed.

This kind of anticipation comes with a burden. Sincerity and authenticity seem to be lost in a digital world where numbers and algorithms are prioritized over human connection. If seeing is such a profound experience in the digital world, what happens to authenticity in art? This question is complicated, but it is still on the right track.

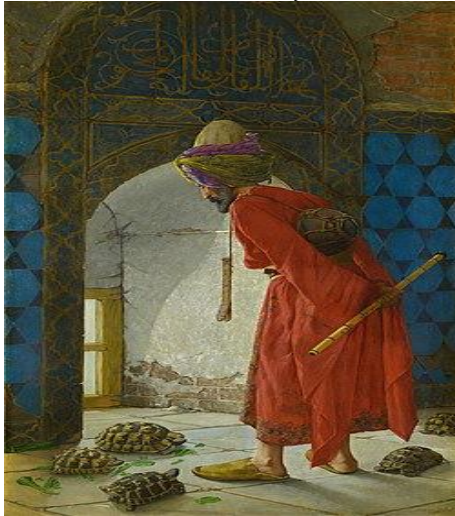
### **Authenticity in Pre-digital and Post-digital Art**

The concept of authenticity pertains to genuine reflections and expressions of one's true self. In this section, I argue that pre-digital art maintains a higher level of originality across different degrees of observation. The first aspect relates to first-order observation, while the second addresses second-order observation. In contrast, post-digital art struggles to preserve authenticity to the same extent as pre-digital art. This is because pre-digital art captures the essence of characters in a manner that suggests an infinite chain of interpretations.

In contrast, post-digital art reflects authenticity in a more confined manner. This distinction raises an important question: What is third-order observation, and how does it relate to authenticity? To answer this, we must first clarify the differences between pre-digital and post-digital art in terms of their evaluative frameworks, supported by relevant examples.

**Figure 2**

*The Tortoise Trainer by Osman Hamdi Bey (1906)*



The Tortoise Trainer (Turkish: *Kaplumbağa Terbiyecisi*) is a captivating painting by the renowned artist Osman Hamdi Bey (1906). This work vividly portrays an anachronistic character—a traditional Ottoman figure striving to train tortoises—and is commonly interpreted as a poignant satire on the sluggish and often ineffective attempts at reforming the Ottoman Empire during that era. The first version of the painting debuted at the Grand Palais in the prestigious 1906 Paris Salon, where it was showcased under the evocative title *L'homme aux Tortues* (Osman Hamdi Bey, 1906, *The Tortoise Trainer*). In this intricately detailed painting, an older man is depicted wearing a rich, traditional Ottoman costume that reflects the cultural heritage of the time. However, he is also influenced by the Western styles emerging from the Tanzimat reforms of the mid-19th century, which aimed to modernize the empire. The man holds a flute, seemingly attempting to direct the tortoises, who are far more interested in the soft, green leaves around them than in his musical coaxing. *The Tortoise Trainer* exemplifies the concept of first-order observation, where the main character engages in direct observation of the tortoises. One distinct and striking feature of this painting lies in its representation of first-order observation as a powerful lens through which to view pre-digital art. The character's perspective acts as the primary and singular vantage point, creating a unique connection between the observer and the observed. Additionally, the painting immerses viewers in ambiguity, revealing a sense of uncertainty through the older man's gaze. Both *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* and *The Tortoise Trainer* share this intriguing aspect, depicting characters who confront a kind of obscurity that invites deeper contemplation within the realm of first-order observation.

### **Second-Order Observation in Art**

Second-order observation, as previously introduced, refers to the act of observing observers or the meta-cognitive process of observing oneself. It is more frequently associated with post-digital media; however, this concept also finds relevance in pre-digital art. For instance, in Claude Monet's enchanting *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* (1873), the viewer is drawn into a reflective moment, capturing not only the subject but also the experience of observation. Similarly, La Robotte's innovative digital artwork *Janvier L'attente* (2001) explores the nuanced layers of perception and awareness, further exemplifying the rich tapestry of second-order observation in both historical and contemporary contexts.



**Figure 3**

*Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* by Claude Monet (1873)



*Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* is a stunning example of Monet's art and Impressionism. The painting depicts Monet's wife sitting on a garden bench within a strong harmony of lights, colors, and elements surrounding her. Monet's wife, Camille Doncieux, is as easily recognizable as the mounds of geraniums in the garden of the couple's rented house in Argenteuil. One of the explanations about the painting is as follows: "Painted the year Camille's father died, she telegraphs sadness while holding a note in her gloved hand. The top-hatted gentleman, later identified as a neighbor, has perhaps called to offer his condolences and a consoling bouquet" (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.).

Though the exact story behind the painting can be definitely known, one thing is clear: Monet's art reveals a profound observation of his environment, and this is why "*Camille Monet on a Garden Bench*" is chosen in the scope of this paper. Camille depicts a strong version of second-order observation, which is characteristic of pre-digital art. Relevantly, the way Camille looks at the Monet seems to enlighten the concept of second-order observation in pre-digital art in relation to the observation of the observer. Monet, as the painter, can be considered the one observing the observer, who is Camille. In other words, the second dimension of the observation comes to the stage, which is about the observation of the observer. While Monet observes Camille, Camille somehow seems to be engaged with how she is being observed, and she calmly or sadly gazes at Monet. Within the second-order observation, Monet is the one who observes the other, through which Camille turns into an observer spontaneously. This spontaneous observation highlights a different layer of second-order observation that should not be overlooked in art and media studies. What makes *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* a unique example is its authentic aspect, in which Camille seems to observe the observer, or, in other words, Monet observes the observer. This unique character of the art raises the concept of second-order observation, which is not only linked to post-digital art but also to pre-digital art, and the concept of third-order observation accompanies it. The concept of third-order observation will be elaborated in terms of *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* soon.

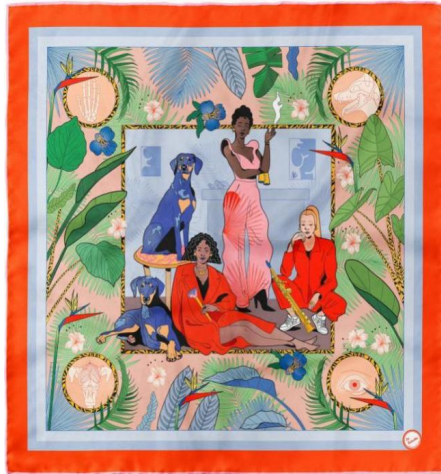
Before this, another example to represent second-order observation in art, and how second-order observation has transformed from pre-digital art into post-digital art, is La Robotte's digital artwork titled *Janvier L'attente* (La Robotte, *Janvier L'attente* in *Artsper Magazine*, 2001). Digital artwork *Janvier L'attente* (La Robotte, 2001) represents a free digital style by



the lesser-known artist La Robotte. In *Janvier L'attente*, La Robotte (2001) applies imaginary forms and scientific exploration through contemporary digital art. This is stated as follows:

**Figure 4**

*Janvier L'attente* by La Robotte (2001)



This digital artwork presents three women and two dogs, all gazing toward the painter. With its surreal and scientific precision, the piece exemplifies the concept of second-order observation in digital art, exploring how observers and the observed interact in contemporary visual culture.

Whether it is digital work, 2D animation, or paintings, the artist La Robotte gives us an eyeful with each new creation. Very intense, her work gambols between the worlds of natural science and the world of the imaginary. Thanks to an artistic technique of scientific precision, she offers spectators a dreamlike journey, one that transcends reality. If La Robotte brings so much to contemporary digital art, it is because of an incredibly dualistic and surrealist approach. Anchored in a very concrete life yet floating in a miraculous universe, her creations are breathtaking. (Halconrui, 2022)

The artwork *Janvier L'attente* (La Robotte, 2001) serves as an example of second-order observation in digital art. According to Halconrui (2022), La Robotte's work gambols between natural science and the world of the imaginary, offering spectators a dreamlike journey that transcends reality. The scene, where three women and two dogs gaze at the painter, seems to be from an imaginary world. This gaze, which encompasses the concept of observing the observer and how observers are observed in turn, is a key aspect of second-order observation. The woman in pink, with her harmonious gesture and contemplative smoking, seems to be engaged in this observation and her own appearance. La Robotte's digital painting is just one instance of digital art in relation to second-order observation, and the examples can be numerous depending on the application of the concept. However, the concept of authenticity in second-order observation in the context of digital art remains ambiguous and this needs to be further explored.

Monet's *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* holds a specific position for authenticity and third-order observation. This work has significantly impacted the evaluation of third-order observation and its relationship with authenticity. Within the scope of the paper, *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* possesses the most profound character of authenticity, as it incorporates a strong version of analog and observational elements. By this, it is meant that a substantial and

plural number of observations by the observer can play a role in evaluating and reshaping authenticity. *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* leaves us with one of the strongest versions of authenticity. If carefully examined, the gentleman, defined as a neighbor by Monet, later, perhaps one who had called to offer his condolences and a consoling bouquet, observes Camille and how she feels being observed (See Figure 3).

### Concluding Remarks

The gentleman in *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* is relevant to another aspect of observational evaluation, which is often overlooked in studies, and it is third-order observation. Third-order observation, a concept that means the observation of the observer's observation, is exemplified in the gentleman's observation of Camille. This form of observation is directly linked to authenticity, which is substantive and reveals the original position of the self. Revealing the self within the other self, like in the example of the gentleman's observation of Camille, opens the third-order observation in relation to authenticity. Authenticity can be satisfied by revealing the self within the other self; therefore, the third-order observation's authentic character is based on its communicative function with the other self. This matters for the social evolution of observation because the gentleman's observation transcends traditional constructivism, which can be associated with single- or first-order observation and communication with the external world. *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* and *The Tortoise Trainer* are examples of first-order observation in traditional constructivism, and they also exhibit authentic character; nevertheless, they are not as strong as in third-order observation. Here, the paper's main question needs to be recalled: What does an authenticity-oriented approach to communication and art look like? One possible response would be that more extensive and analog observations need to be explored for future studies. This is not only relevant to authenticity and its relation to the “seeing is being” theme discussed earlier by Moeller & D'Ambrosia, but also its limitation with first-order observation.

The paper's primary motivation is rooted in the question: “How did the Social Evolution of Order Observation Evolve Through Time?” To illustrate this, examples from art history are presented to explain the complexity of the authenticity-oriented approach. This approach is not easily defined, as one specific definition would negate the others. However, the gentleman *Camille Monet on a Garden Bench* opens up a more expansive room for authenticity. It's important to note that authenticity can be maintained, even with an infinite number of observations, and it is not sufficiently found in digital art. The paper does not claim that social evolution or order observation has not evolved, but rather that it has lost its authentic character. One of the internal criticisms of this paper is as follows: Many studies overlook the infinite character of order observation, including third-order observation in pre-digital art. An authenticity-oriented approach to art can address this. By this approach, unique aspects of characters and the way characters reveal themselves within different layers of observation can be made visible. The social evolution of order observation unfolds across different layers over time, and this is due to the (in)finite characteristics of order observation hidden in art. One of the outputs of this research is to highlight the (in) finite characters of analog and observational art in different periods throughout art history, and how they transform from pre-digital art to post-digital art. The details about differences between analog and observational art are intentionally left blank for future studies in communication and art.

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**Contact email:** tugbagulal@aydin.edu.tr