

The Sartrean Dimension in the Works and Texts of Arslohgo

Existence, Imagination, and the Gaze in a Digital Art Project

adw.lohgo.net

I. An Artist Without an Essence

Jean-Paul Sartre never wrote an essay about Arslohgo. That fact is less obvious than it sounds, because Sartre did write about Giacometti, about Tintoretto, about Wols — about artists in whose work he saw existential truths flash into view. Arslohgo, the creator of the digital art project Artdig WorX (adw.lohgo.net), is a contemporary Sartre could never have encountered. And yet: anyone who knows this digital artist's work — who reads his image-texts, browses his categories, and listens to what he says about himself — will sense a philosophical kinship that goes beyond mere analogy. Arslohgo works in a Sartrean mode, not because he has read or cited Sartre, but because his entire practice rests on the same existential-philosophical convictions: that human beings have no given nature, that we make ourselves through our choices and our work, that consciousness always already reaches beyond reality, and that the Other's gaze fundamentally structures human experience.

This essay sets out to read Arslohgo's work through the lens of four central Sartrean categories: existence and self-projection, the imaginary as the space of freedom, the temporality of consciousness, and the gaze — *le regard* — as a constitutive way of being in the world. It draws on the works collected in the site's portfolio as well as on the artist's own statements in his image-texts.

II. Existence Before Essence: The Artist as Self-Projection

Sartre's most famous claim is this: *l'existence précède l'essence* — existence precedes essence. A human being is initially nothing; what one becomes is entirely the product of what one does. No god, no nature, no fixed substance determines us in advance. Biography is not fate — it is a project.

Arslohgo's story is an almost textbook illustration of this principle. The artist — a software developer and computer science teacher by profession — spent decades without making art. An early creative period he calls the "Atramentocene" (1981–1995, an era of ink art) had been over for nearly thirty years. What drew him back to art-making was not an aesthetic program or a theoretical manifesto. It was grief. In his work *Recalling the Inkocene* he writes: "In the darkest time after C.'s death, when the past consumed the present and the future ceased to matter, memories of my Atramentocene resurfaced." What began as a way of distracting himself from pain became the founding act of a new artistic identity — Arslohgo and his "Digitartocene" (2023 to the present).

This is pure Sartre. Identity does not emerge from what one is; it emerges from what one does — from the decision, in the face of nothingness (of death, of loss, of meaninglessness), to impose form. Arslough created himself through his work. The name itself — a wordplay, a trademark, an artificial persona — is not a pseudonym but a self-projection in the Sartrean sense: the free installation of a way of existing that was not there before.

Sartre's insistence on the artist's situation also finds a living counterpart in Arslough. Just as Sartre showed with Tintoretto — the painter as prisoner of his Venetian class, his era, his system of patronage — Arslough's work grows out of the concrete conditions of a life: the view from his kitchen window (the SKY series), a random reach into the bookshelf (the Poe series), a BIOS update on a Dell computer (Del-l-aware). Situation provides the impulse; freedom lies in the transformation.

III. The Imaginary: Language as the Negation of Reality

In *The Imaginary* (1940), Sartre drew his most consequential distinction. Perception is directed at the present, the real, the changing. Imagination, by contrast, posits its object as absent, as unreal — it negates the given world in favor of an imaginary object. A portrait of Charles XII is not an object in the world but a passageway into the non-present: consciousness directs itself through the canvas at something that is not there.

Arslough's guiding motto — “Arslough visualizes language or verbalizes images” — is nothing less than a practical formula for this Sartrean mechanism. Every work he makes performs a double negation: the image points toward something invisible (a word, a concept, a sound), while the language points toward something unspeakable (an image, a mood, a perception). Between the two lies the imaginary.

This is most concentrated in the work *The Artichoke Metaphor*: when we read the word “artichoke,” we inwardly see an image; when we look at a picture of an artichoke, we inwardly hear the word. Between the two yawns a gap — and it is in that gap that imagination operates. The work takes the very structure of the imaginary as its subject. Language (saussurement) does something similar: the Saussurean arbitrariness of the linguistic sign — the fact that no natural bond connects signifier to signified — becomes the basis of a musical-visual wordplay. Consciousness slips between the codes and finds no solid ground anywhere.

The entire MCE series — Arslough's extended engagement with the work of M. C. Escher — is applied Sartrean imagination theory. Escher's works are not reproduced but negated: set as a point of departure in order to push through them toward something else. In *MCE Dream Deconstructed & Rebuilt*, Escher's “Dream” structure undergoes a complete architectural reversal; in *MCE Day & Night Metamorph*, the original experiences a shift in perspective. The imaginary emerges from the denial of the real.

Sartre's claim is that imagination is freedom. To imagine something is to momentarily escape the dictates of the factual. Arslough would agree — without using that language. “Artdig WorX is meant to be a playground.” In Sartre, playfulness is not the opposite of seriousness; it is seriousness's expression — freedom that does not forget itself.

IV. Temporality: Consciousness Between Past and Future

Sartre does not think of time as a neutral container. Time is the existential structure of human consciousness. The “for-itself” (pour-soi) is temporally torn: it carries the past within it, lives in the moment, and projects itself toward the future. Unlike the “in-itself” (en-soi) of things — which simply are — human consciousness is always already beyond itself. No moment can be held.

The work *Halb-e-Zeit* is the purest formal expression of this insight: a digitally halved time display that, despite its incompleteness, is still readable as a time indication. Time does not exist here as a completed fact but as a projection by the perceiving consciousness that fills in the gap. The gap in the image corresponds to the gap that Sartre locates within human being itself — the not-being that constitutes us and that we perpetually try to fill through our projects.

Even more direct is *Mysterious MCE on Lisa*, which poses the question explicitly: “How present is the past, how past is the present? How ghostly is the modern, how modern is the ghostly?” Here the artist addresses Sartre’s temporal structure head-on. The viewer’s consciousness — confronted with this reworked image of the *Mona Lisa* — holds past and present simultaneously. It cannot do otherwise: perception is temporally constituted, and the image speaks from two times at once.

That *Arslohgo*’s entire project arose from the eruption of the past into the present — from grief over *C.*, which, as he writes in *Recalling the Inkocene*, “consumed the present” — gives this temporal theme a biographical depth. When Sartre describes how the breakdown of the for-itself’s temporal structure — freezing in the past, the drying up of the future project — transforms consciousness into a kind of thing-being, he is describing exactly the paralysis from which *Arslohgo* fought his way out through art.

The future appears in *Mediterranean Future* (the *Mediterranean*, 2323 CE) as an imagined catastrophe: an ocean without life, a civilization at the end of its rope. This is Sartrean future-philosophy in apocalyptic mode — the future as that toward which a community projects itself, and against which it can fail.

V. Le Regard: The Gaze as World Constitution

Perhaps Sartre’s most radical contribution to the philosophy of art lies in his analysis of the gaze. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), he argues that the Other’s look transforms me into an object. I experience myself as seen — and therefore as a thing in the Other’s world. This is alienation, but it is also constitution: I exist for others insofar as I am seen. The work of art inverts this relationship. It does not look back. It creates a safe space for looking — a place of freedom.

No work in *Arslohgo*’s portfolio addresses this more directly than *Unseen Gazes in Desolate Landscape*. The artist describes a foggy moorland in which the feeling of being watched slowly takes hold: “A feeling creeps in of being watched, a strange presence in the solitude, when the landscape blurs in the mist and it’s as if the landscape itself becomes the observer.” The gaze comes from nowhere — from dead trees, dark water,

silence. And yet it operates. It transforms the space, objectifying the viewer's presence. Sartre would have read this as an illustration of the primal structure of the regard: the gaze does not need to be seen to function. Its mere possibility is enough to make consciousness an object.

Skeye — an eye-shape formed from a cloud formation, a fusion of “sky” and “eye” — is the most literal image of this experience: the sky gazes back. Here nature itself becomes an instance of the regard. The cosmic eye watches the viewer without intention, without a subject behind the gaze. This anonymous, subjectless structure of looking is familiar to Sartre: it is the form of the gaze that disturbs most deeply, precisely because it admits of no reciprocity.

In OOII — Ozzy Osbourne, the gaze is simultaneously political and metaphysical: “The Prince of Darkness now looks out from outside, from true endless darkness, through the window to the world.” A gaze out of absolute darkness — this is Sartre's regard in its most extreme form: it comes from outside, it strikes without itself being visible, it constitutes a world by looking at it while belonging to none.

L'Arbre des cinq femmes operates more subtly. Five female silhouettes hide within a tree and reveal themselves only on closer inspection. The work structures the gaze as a process of discovery — and then reverses the relationship: the figures are not the ones being looked at; they look back the moment they are recognized. The viewer becomes the viewed at the precise instant of believing the image is fully grasped.

VI. Engagement: Art as a Stance Toward the World

Sartre's concept of *littérature engagée* — committed literature that takes responsibility for the world — applies to the visual arts as well, though in a modified form. Painting does not commit itself through statements; it commits through the way it shows the world: through its angle of vision, through what it makes visible and what it withholds.

Arslohgo's political works follow exactly this logic. State of Qatarsis commemorates the migrant workers who died during construction of the World Cup stadiums in Qatar. The title — a wordplay on “Qatar” and “catharsis” — couples political indictment with aesthetic reflection: art as a cleansing that reminds viewers of their own complicity as spectators. New ICEland — Land of the Unfree takes aim at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency and the disenfranchisement of migrants. X-tinction of the Truth analyzes the social network X as an instrument for the destruction of truth. G-sus left Birmingham long time ago dissects racist religiosity in the American Bible Belt.

These works are not illustrative — they don't function as posters. They intervene in the visible: they show who is seen and who is not, whose gaze counts and whose voice is absent. That is political commitment through the regard itself.

VII. Alienation and the Plural Self

Sartre's concept of *aliénation* — alienation — describes the process by which a person becomes a stranger to themselves: no longer recognizing themselves in their own

objectification, experiencing themselves as a thing rather than as freedom. The work *Alienation* takes up this theme with disarming directness. Arslougho describes his growing dependence on the smartphone — a device he resisted for a long time, then adopted for work reasons, and now cannot do without to the point of carrying a second one as a backup.

His response to this experience of alienation is telling: “It’s a good thing we’re multiple selves in a way: while we become alienated from ourselves in one life context, we befriend ourselves in and through another context, hopefully maintaining our balance.” This is not naive — it is a pragmatic reformulation of the Sartrean idea of freedom. When consciousness reifies itself in one context, it can reclaim its freedom in another. Art is precisely that other context.

Here is what connects Sartre’s philosophy to Arslougho’s practice: making art is not an escape from reality but a reclamation of freedom within it. It is the active response to a world that constantly threatens to turn consciousness into a thing.

VIII. Conclusion: The Organized Nothingness

Sartre describes the work of art as an “organized nothingness” — an imaginary object that exists outside causality, immune to time and decay, posited through the free negation of the given. Arslougho’s miniposters are exactly that: they exist digitally, without material support, without oil or canvas; they are images that exist through consciousness, not in the world.

What distinguishes Arslougho’s work in Sartrean terms is not his philosophy — he is not a theorist — but his mode of existing as an artist. He has made himself through his work (existence before essence). He negates the given in favor of the imaginary (imagination as freedom). He is temporally torn between the Atramentocene and the Digitartocene, between past and future (the temporality of consciousness). He makes the gaze his subject — his own gaze, the gaze of the works, the world’s gaze upon the human being (*le regard*). And he takes a position on the world, because he knows that silence is also a decision (engagement).

Sartre once wrote about Giacometti that his sculptures showed the human being as the creature that is seen — from a distance, alien, beyond reach. Of Arslougho one might say this: his works show consciousness watching itself see — and discovering, in that act of watching, that it is free. That is the Sartrean lesson that speaks from adw.lohgo.net without ever naming itself as such.

* * *

*All works and texts cited are drawn from the digital art project *Artdig WorX* by Arslougho, accessible at adw.lohgo.net (as of March 2026).*