If You See Something, Say Something: A Look at Experimental Writing on Art

Charlotte Lucy Latham

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Esthetics Commons, and the Theory and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation
Latham, Charlotte Lucy, "If You See Something, Say Something: A Look at Experimental Writing on Art" (2014). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/442

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
If You See Something, Say Something:

A Look at Experiments in Art Writing

By

Charlotte Lucy Latham

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dr. Wayne Koestenbaum

8/20/2014

Date     Chair of Examining Committee

Dr. Giancarlo Lombardi

8/20/2014

Date     Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Wayne Koestenbaum

Dr. Mary Ann Caws

Dr. Andre Aciman

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

If You See Something, Say Something: A Look at Experiments in Art Writing

by
Charlote Lucy Latham

Adviser: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum

Signs all over New York City state, “If you see something, say something,” but museum studies repeatedly find viewers do not attend to pictures, just as eye witness testimony is invariably skewed. Ways of seeing have been limited to known ways of discussing. Alternative approaches offer new insights. The first section, “Experiments in Art Writing,” examines two texts: T.J. Clark’s The Sight of Death, a journal of his daily visits looking at two Poussin paintings, for which he maintains the ambiguity of exploration and argues to keep visual images from their dissolution into political symbols; and, Charles Simic’s Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell, which foregrounds the imaginative as necessary to a critical reception of art. The second section, “Literary Ekphrases as Art History and Theory,” examines a passage in Proust and a poem by William Carlos Williams to suggest that poetry and prose fiction not only introduce readers to art history but are extensions of the discussed visual works’ own art history, and then turns to Don DeLillo’s Point Omega to study the arguments around representation as voiced and experienced by the characters, and to suggest a move away from the concept of representation. The final section, “The Writing on the Wall,” analyzes captions from Tate Modern’s little-known but significant caption project Bigger Picture to develop a theoretical validation for such an experimental program. These authors show us how they see rather than simply what they see,
and so reveal the advantages and dangers in their choices, recommending we develop renditions of what we see, where to see means both a visual ability and an articulate response.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are several whose presence was more than intellectual as they guided my development. I got to see and hear and share their intellectual practice. I should name Grant Franks and Barry Goldfarb at St. John’s College, Santa Fe, and Giancarlo Lombardi, Evelyn Ender, and Joan Richardson at the CUNY Graduate Center. But, André Aciman made me do it. He made me start, he reminded me not to worry about things of secondary importance, and he taunted me to finish as only a true friend can. In addition, I couldn’t have imagined this project without the support of Mary Ann Caws. The strength and charm of her work assured me that the strangest elements can be brought together, that warmth is key to celebrating those disparate parts, and that one often doesn’t wind up where one expected. And, that is for the good of the work. Lastly appeared Wayne Koestenbaum. I’m not at all sure how to thank him for his teachings. He leaves me in a bit of awe. I can never quite find the right words—mine seem syrupy, excessive, or too finely wrought. So... Thank you for suggesting that I might have a reader who wants to know what I think, that the weirdness of what I have chosen might be worth reveling in and thus revealing, that I might simply adopt the first person to say what I think rather than complicating it in passive sentences. I am still learning.

There are friends of course who kept me sane and refused to allow my occasional dissatisfaction with academia to halt my course. LaV on Kellner gave me a place to work, Diet Cokes in endless supply, and a constant friendship that made me want to write something that would matter. Jen Corns let me be honestly angry, despondent, proud, without ever shaming those feelings that will arise in reading, and writing, and thinking some more; she supported my work even as it differs from the tremendous analytic capacity she brings to philosophy. Lee Hallman’s interest in my curious project helped me believe that there might be a small audience in the field of art history who would not disparage what I wrote, who might be intrigued even if only for amusement’s sake. Beth McGuire keeps me human, from the tips of my toes, through the depths of my past, into the voice I select. Meir Gal makes me think about what kind of human, what kind of scholar and teacher, student and artist, I want to be. Joan Kavanaugh helped me keep ahold of myself whatever life, or the work, brought. Sulynn Taylor makes me take the whole thing less seriously, which was seriously needed throughout this process.

Lastly, I met Tim Kent a few weeks before starting graduate school. He has been through every step of the last five years with me, and surely deserves some honorary degree for his unfailing interest in a topic forced upon him across innumerable dialogues, and the occasional monologue. He is always there walking our dog Pitunia, feeding our cat Wooster, listening to me as I try ideas then reject them with dismay, fear, anger, or adopt them with trepidation, excitement, conviction. His conversation, his questions, his paintings underlie the best that is here. In the realm of cliché, it’s trite but true, I couldn’t have done it without him.

Thank you all,
Charlotte Lucy Latham, soon to be Kent
August 20, 2014
If You See Something, Say Something:  
A Look at Experiments in Art Writing

By Charlotte Lucy Latham

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Experiments in Art Writing</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II.1 – “Viewer Like Me”: T.J. Clark’s <em>The Sight of Death</em></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II.2 – Labyrinth of Analogies: Imagination in Charles Simic’s <em>Dime Store Alchemy</em></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Literary Ekphrases as Art History and Theory</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III.1 – Proust’s Provocation: Vermeer, Swann, and the Reader</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III.2 – Ways of Seeing William Carlos Williams’ “Pictures from Breughel”</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III.3 – Possible Rendition: Aesthetic Politics in Don DeLillo’s <em>Point Omega</em></td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. The Writing on The Wall: Tate Modern’s “Bigger Picture” Caption Project</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV.1 – The Writing on the Wall at Tate Modern</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV.2 – Bigger Ideas for Tate Modern’s Bigger Picture</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV.3 – Remapping the Museum Visit: An Interdisciplinary Tour</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV.4 – Critical Cuts Expands Spectatorship</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Conclusion: Attention Now! If You See Something, Say Something!</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Bibliography</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. INTRODUCTION

I foresaw the possibility of raising myself to a poetical understanding, rich in delights, of manifold forms which I had not hitherto isolated from the total spectacle of reality.
- Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol 2 In a Budding Grove*

Looking back, I think I started reading stories about art because I tired of *eros* and *arate*. In the wrath of *The Iliad* or Woolf’s *The Waves*, through the passion of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* or Nabokov’s *Lolita*, humanity’s highs and lows were exhausting. I had tired of *bildüngsroman* too and sought something else. Novels, stories, poems, and later essays around works of art provided an account of something other than the endless waking, worrying, working, warring, and worshiping of my own life.

These ekphrastic texts certainly included their fair share of wrath and passion—Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* being perhaps a perfect aesthetic rendering of both—but more often the works of art seemed there to evoke a sense of something lost, desired, or not yet understood, which might not be resolved by the end of the text, but spoke to my own experience of wandering, in and beyond museums. As a child, I followed adults around rooms filled with art, uncertain what I was looking at or why they cared so much, until the summer when I was told to roam for myself and expected to report in the evening over dinner on what I had found. I had all the Smithsonian museums to observe, from the Air and Space to the Hirschhorn. While my father was at work, for eight hours a day, for five days a week, I roamed the halls of art and space—
aimlessly the first week. But that got dull, so I started looking for something that I wanted to look at. When I found it, I stared. I found that my mind would often make up stories about the people in the picture, or what I might see around the bend in the road, or what the breeze might feel like on a riverbank in the summer, or find strange ideas surfacing as I gazed at a large canvas of black and white stripes.

I picked postcards from the gift shop that made me think of someone even if the likeness was not apt, a peculiar act I thought, until I read Proust and learned that poor Swann did the same. I was much relieved, however, that I had been able to maintain the distinction between the work of art and the person, but understood the tendency, or even desire, to get lost in another world. As I kept reading Proust’s great tome, I found the passages about art enthralling, and read for those, rather irritated when the various love affairs, diplomatic expositions, or topographic discussions intruded. Were the works real? Was that particular work significant to the story? Was it a clue? Was it a passing digression for no purpose but the pleasure of including it?

Fiction is used to describe the human experience of love, death, birth, war, education, and we all nod that, yes, the writer has captured that special something about those major life experiences. Art, however, remains on hallowed grounds, as if the experience of looking at art might not accurately be captured by fiction just as fiction manages to describe those other pastimes. Can’t we learn something about how and why to look at art from reading about others’ experiences of doing so, whether those others be real persons or fictional characters? This project stems from the extensive pleasure I have found in perverse personal, fictional, and poetic accounts of looking at art.
Deciding to turn my attention to descriptions of works of art in unexpected places seemed like fun. There have been fun moments. But, when someone described the project as a bucolic Poussin, I had reached the point when the effort was better compared to the flayed cow of the Rembrandt school, or Turner’s stormy sunsets. Trying to articulate the curious qualities of art writing when it isn’t art history, isn’t art criticism, but is nevertheless about art has led to psychological moments that made Picasso’s *Guernica* and Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings seem like representations of control.

And thus I arrive at this tortured word: representation.

*****

Representation. What is representation? For Socrates in Plato’s *Dialogues* representation was the problem of copying a copy of the ideal forms (a picture of a bed that is a worldly copy of the concept of bed-ness), rather than living a life of philosophy considering truth, in all its abstracted, eternal glory. Representation was a false presence, and presence was itself simply a material body in the here and now, rather than the pure concept of the Ideal Forms. Aristotle offered representation, at least in the form of tragedy, an ethical role to play in life. For Plato, art’s pretense at truth was a travesty, while for Aristotle art does not aim for truth. Art is a pretense, a falsity, a representation of the real or not real, but no matter what, art and truth have no relationship. Art can be spiritually and intellectually confusing, to be banned, or ethically educational, cautiously maintained, and so art flip-flops through the ages, as icon, emblem, sign, as a system of perspective, impression, expression, and then neither, at which point the whole question of representation as a concept is questioned by Danto is his landmark article “Works of
Art and Mere Real Things,” later published in his collection Transfiguration of the Commonplace. Art, he claimed, has nothing to do with the theoretical problems of mimesis. Art is anything that has been bracketed, set on stage, put in quotes, placed in a frame.\textsuperscript{1} Much to his dismay, the ideas set forth were developed by others into the institutional theory of art, which entirely dismisses the concept of representation he only tentatively set aside, and built what has proven to be an equally rigid alternative. Recently, various critics have argued that there are in fact art worlds, so that art is no more easily placed within that structure than within mimesis.\textsuperscript{2}

Just as art has struggled with its relationship to reality being bound by the notion of representation, so language about art has particularly struggled with the issue of representation. Language seems obviously to be standing in place of the art it purports to discuss. Plutarch cited Simonides as saying that painting is a mute poetry, and poetry a speaking picture. Horace’s line, from Ars Poetica, “ut pictoria poesis” seems to argue for the superiority of pictures over language. The contest between language and art found its highest articulation in the paragone of the Renaissance, when poetry, which had offered nothing new since the Petrarchan sonnet, struggled against the major developments in painting (such as perspective, oil paint and glazing, and even anatomical studies, though this last can be seen as an adoption of an interest from antiquity). Painting’s new possibilities aimed to provide a realistic representation of the world, which poetry contested with the claim that poetic description gave voice to a mute art object, pointing at art’s inability to articulate and discourse its complex thoughts about the world.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing further divided the two sister arts in his Laöcoon: an Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry (1766). Poetry was based in time, one word leading to the

\textsuperscript{1} Arthur C. Danto, Transfiguration of the Commonplace (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 23.
other. Painting and sculpture were set in space, the eye roaming around the material. His ekphrastic distinction was accepted until Murray Krieger revoked the split in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1967). Ekphrasis had been a rhetorical device taught in Classical rhetoric schools to young men as a technique for describing people, places, events, scenes, and—but clearly not exclusively—art objects, as Ruth Webb describes in *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (2009). The term literally meant “to speak out fully” but by the 3rd Century CE was designated for descriptions of visual art. The term regained currency in the mid-20th Century, when formalist New Critics (such as Krieger, though he would introduce a strong semiotic strain into his readings) applied it to writing that attempts to envoice the art object, as exemplified by Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The term itself, therefore, has an uncertain meaning, shifting with each new scholarly focus.

The poetic voice speaking for the mute art object was analyzed in the later 20th Century as an example of a deeply rooted gender bias of ekphrasis, now defined as “a verbal representation of a visual representation” by James A. Heffernan. Among others, Heffernan in *Museum of Words* (1994) and W.J.T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory* (1995) argued for the ekphrastic competition between the “sister arts.” The active, outspoken, declarative masculine language controls the passive, mute feminine object of beauty. As in Keats’ poem, the masculine speaker provides words on behalf of the feminized silent object. Mary Ann Caws in *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts* (1989) argued for the pleasures in

---

Footnotes:


4 See James A. Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991), 297-316. This essay is expanded in Heffernan’s *Museum of Words*, and the new definition has been largely adopted.
struggling with the differences between the visual and the verbal. The two were not bitterly antagonistic but taut friends.

The poet and scholar John Hollander turned his attention, in *The Gazer’s Spirit* (1995), to cataloguing the different types of ekphrastic modalities: notional, actual, actual where the work is no longer in existence, illustrations, and emblems (Renaissance woodcuts or engravings with a motto or tag identifying a moral related the rest of the text). The ekphrastic passage varies according to the needs, or desires, of the text, where art is used allegorically (Achilles shield in Homer’s *The Iliad*), or serves a crucial element of the narration (*The Rape of the Lock*).

Hollander shows that the rhetoric of ekphrasis is an inventive device rather than an aggressive one, attempting to supplant the visual item. Across all these studies, ekphrasis was identified with literature. The association with the rhetoric of poetry made critical writings on art seem a poor prose alternative for analysis.

Art history, as writing about art, has also been perceived as operating as a representation of art, albeit its disciplinary procedures made this act of representation seem self-evident. Donald Preziosi’s *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (1998) opens by suggesting that “it is necessary to look more closely at certain assumptions about the nature of art historical knowledge and at the perspectives on the history of the discipline characteristically promulgated by art historians and other humanists.” Whether art history began with Vasari’s biographies or

---

5 Caws’ *Art of Interference* (1989) introduces a positive quality of stress explained as: 1) the anxiety of the project of comparison (psychological stress); 2) metrical stress, the process of noticing, highlighting selected details; 3) metallurgical stress, the effort and straining of the enduring reader. These stresses highlight the subjectivity involved in the ekphrastic reading/writing process which invokes the interference of her title, how these overlay, intensify, and reorder each other, filling semantic gaps by reading over each other, but also producing the sometimes complicated aspect of ekphrasis, that is its unwillingness to be neatly divided and categorized. I concur that this stress heightens the tension of the verbal-visual experience.

with Hegel’s theoretical discussions on aesthetics, both set standards for the discussion. One focuses on the life and times of the artist, and his (because in Vasari’s case there were no women) work. The other considers such questions as beauty, ethics, meaning, and then applies those considerations to the evaluation of specific art objects. The art historian’s seemingly objective stance is imposed by the supposition that the historian is not personally involved in the object, period or person of study, but ignores the historian’s own time and place.

The art historian may not “assign any set of meanings, referents, or associations in an artwork,” which requires “a code of determined and determinate formation and content.” That code must be learned by each aspiring art historian to ensure that “ambiguity, internal incoherence, or contradiction are to be gradually eliminated as the historian or critic comes to elaborate a hypothesis that can account for and render mutually coherent the greatest number of elements in the work, in the life, in the period.” Only one hypothesis will satisfy and it can only be obtained by mastering “the discursive protocols...bent towards making specific (and specifically post Renaissance Western) ideas about art as an object in its own right inevitable and natural.” Art historical writing on art presents researched, determined interpretations and these statements then figure largely in how art is seen.

The naturalization of the disciplinary language makes several presumptions requisite for the discipline: 1) the object of art is “always communicating, or is always communicating in the same or equivalent ways over time and context”; 2) the object of art’s speaking power supposes the object has “an ontological status, an otherness that is and must be autonomous to the analyst and subject”; 3) the historian analyst must maintain the autonomy of the object of art in order to

---

7 ibid., 29.
8 ibid., 42-3.
9 ibid., 51.
remain objective; 4) the historian and critic are situated “as sacerdotal semioticians or diviners of intentionality on behalf of a lay congregation”; 5) lay audiences do not have access to the meaning or intention of the work of art unless they, too, master the disciplinary code.¹⁰

David Carrier has examined the rhetoric of art writings in several texts and believes that the propagation of photographs, in the 20th century, and online store houses of images, in the 21st century, have changed art historical writing’s emphasis on ekphrasis, since art writers could expect that readers would see the work of art through a reproduction and not need the work visually described for them.¹¹ The breakdown of stabilizing concepts like truth and beauty, along with the rise of photographs, altered art historical writing from one that largely described and then interpreted (for example Goethe’s essay “Leonardo da Vinci’s celebrated picture of The Last Supper”) to one focused on interpretation tout court.

Donald Preziosi, David Carrier, Keith Moxey in The Practices of Persuasion, Michael Baxandall in Patterns of Intention, Jas Elsner, Mieke Bal, and many others have been instrumental in opening a discussion about how art historical writings are subject to their formulations and reveal ideological concerns. Showing the framework and rhetorical devices in art historical writing highlighted the non-objective elements within art history. The authoritative voice has been used since Philostratus’ Imagines toured a series of frescoes with a group of unruly youngsters, and told them how each ought to be examined.¹² Alternatively, and in response to the concerns of subjectivity in the 18th century’s arguments about a judgment of taste, the scholar’s presence became minimized by using the third person, adopting the accepted

¹⁰ ibid., 45, 35, 38.
¹¹ David Carrier, Writing About Visual Art (New York: School of Visual Arts; Allworth Press, 2003), 190.
¹² Philostratus’ Imagines are dual in that they are spoken to boys in front of the paintings, but are thereby inducting the reader into how to learn about and then look at art. The sophistry here is that the description of the pictures is so remarkable that we entirely forget the orator, Philostratus, or rather his existence as speaking to us.
language code, and building ideas based on earlier experts’ writings. The subjective was veiled, rather than being acknowledged as a part of the art historian’s ability to judge, discern, and discuss. Despite the disciplinary critiques by those mentioned, scholars of art history rarely emerge from the objective code of their training.

Just as most art historians also incorporate aesthetic theories into their writing, many also produce art criticism; until fairly recently most published writing on art was art criticism. Those in the visual arts maintain an ongoing dialogue about “art objects and how they compare with what has preceded them” reinforced by art history, theory, and criticism. The three are difficult to separate in any particular example of art writing, but like pornography you know it when you see it. James Elkins in his introduction to *Is Art History Global?* succinctly states the distinction between art history and criticism as being found within “institutional, contextual, and commercial criteria.” Art theory can include the writings of Plato and Aristotle on art and literature, as well as contemporary concerns written by artists or academics; aesthetics is the term of a German 18th century philosopher who was struggling to focus arguments about taste by developing specific argument criteria, and is limited to an academic discourse. Art history can be said to begin with Vasari, but it was largely an elite pastime, and did not gain a public presence until the establishment of museums in the early 19th century, nor an academic presence until the 1850s in Germany and the 1870s in the United States. The discipline of the study of art begins

---

14 Justice Potter Steward of the U.S. Supreme Court famously wrote that “hard-core pornography” was hard to define, but “I know it when I see it.”
16 Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klönk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 21-2. The first chair in Art History was in 1813 at the University of Göttingen, but “the man appointed, Johann Dominicus Fiorillo, was a drawing master and his lectures followed the tradition of academic art theory.” Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 9. In the United States, Harvard appointed Charles Eliot Norton in 1874 as Lecturer on History of the Fine Arts as Connected with Literature—“one of the earliest formal appearances of art history in the American university” and introduced as “a visual analogue of literature.”
with art criticism; in the serious attempts of the early French and English critics, writing Salons and Exhibition reviews, lies the discipline’s descriptive tendencies.

Jonathan Richardson the Elder first coined the term for his 1719 book *An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism*, where he set out seven categories “integral to the success of a painting (these included invention, composition, drawing, and coloring)” and provided a scoring system between 0-18 for each one.17 Denis Diderot, however, stands as the forerunner of art criticism with his lengthy, eloquent Salons in which he outlined his system for looking.18 His critical writings supply “a lively combination of reactions, prescriptions, and advice and are widely seen as pioneering works in the medium.”19 He wrote for a limited, international readership who would not see the works displayed in Paris and so was obligated to be detailed in his description. The art critic Laurence Alloway could write in 1984 that art criticism “remains what it was when Denis Diderot invented it.”20 These descriptive tendencies may have been mitigated by the profusion of reproductions, in books and online, but they explain some of the tensions around language discussing art.

Art criticism developed a variety of new terms. The French and British Royal Academies created “new words and phrases that were bandied about the royal studios,” then included in criticism to show the writer’s familiarity with court life, but also provided the needed nuance for this new writing practice.21 Attempts at definitions on aesthetics introduced specific applications

---

18 Diderot on how to describe a painting: “j’indique d’abord le sujet, je passe au principal personage, de la aux personnages subordonnes dans le meme groupe, aux groupe lies avec le premier, me laissant conduire par leur enchainement; aux expressions, aux characters, aux draperies, au coloris, a la distribution des ombres et des luminieres, aux accessories, enfin a l’impression de l’ensemble. Si je suis un autre ordre, c’est que ma description est mal faite, ou le tableau est mal ordonne.” Diderot claimed that if he could not follow this system that either his description was poor or the painting badly done. Gita May in *Baudelaire and Diderot* warns against taking his description of the formula too literally.
19 Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 30.
20 As quoted in Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 31.
21 Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 27.
for terms, and required knowledge of that language code. Criticism has often been the first to name new works, such as Apollinaire’s coining “cubism,” or “surrealism” in his reviews, but then continued across 20th century writings as -isms proliferated. The verbal names, and thus claims, the visual.

So, language overpowers, replaces, restricts, and represents art. Conversely, many now argue, by observing the proliferation of images through advertising, news made into evening spectacle, and the production of celebrities into iconic types, that the visual dominates. Concern for this leads some, like W.J.T. Mitchell in *What do Images Want?*, to advocate for increased education in visual culture, while others, like T.J. Clark, argue that images are still under the domain of the verbal through the use of slogans, branding, captions, and expressed cultural ideas connected to the image.

Theories and ideas expressed in language do sometimes get wrapped around art works in a manner that limits other ways of seeing. Clement Greenberg’s insistence on formalism refused to consider artists’ own ideas about their work, even attempting to silence them publicly. In this instance, Greenberg intended to have his ideas dominate reception of the visual and so was actively attempting to represent the artists’ works. Joseph Kosuth has expressed outrage at the interpretations that Ben Buchloh and others at *October* have written about his work. Unless the language is produced specifically to delimit the experience of the art, or the art minimizes the language, painters and poets rarely worry about the oppression of one medium over the other.

Besides recent artists who have chosen to work directly with language (Jenny Holzer, John Baldessari), many cooperative projects exist between painters and poets (for example, John

---

Ashbery with Joe Brainard, Frank O’Hara with Larry Rivers). Writers and artists have a history of mutual respect, appreciation, and cooperation. When artists do not reduce language to purely descriptive service, and when writers do not use art merely to illustrate their statements, an exciting confluence occurs which all must navigate conscientiously. In such play, representation is irrelevant. The reader/viewer is challenged to greater awareness of the words and the images being offered.

*****

David Carrier in his article “Writing on the History of Art” explains that he is not an art historian but a scholar of their writings: “Since my sense of things comes from reading, I understand artwriting by analyzing texts.” My project understands the same principle, applying it to writings on art that are self-evidently not a part of art history’s disciplinary practice. This project brings together an unusual assortment of texts that address art to highlight how non-disciplinary texts also have something to offer the discipline. Often ideas arise that are not directly related to art or vision, but that contribute to the “ways of seeing” derived from the text. Across the essays, journals, poems, captions, and stories, I look at what the author describes seeing, as well as what then comes of that seeing. This work is divided into three sections. “Experiments in Art Writing” considers the style and format of learned writing on art; “Literary Ekphrases as Art History and Theory” explores literature proper as another place where we learn about the value and meaning, the virtue and vice of art; and, “The Writing on the Wall” offers a case study by examining language about art in the museum.

---

23 Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” 402.
Baudelaire wrote that “Criticism should be partial, impassioned, political—that is to say formed from an exclusive point of view, but also from a point of view that opens up the greatest number of horizons.”  

Given the constraints discussed in art writing, the first section, “Experiments in Art Writing,” considers how these outlandish attempts expand the horizons of art writing. T.J. Clark’s *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2010) offered a journal of his visual reflections on two Poussin paintings and Charles Simic wrote the much-acclaimed *Dime Store Alchemy* (1995) about Joseph Cornell and some of his boxes. Neither of these writers followed the biographical format established centuries ago by Vasari, nor interpreted the artist or his works from a formalized categorical or theoretical standpoint. Both, however, were published as “Art” books, labeled as such, reviewed as such, enjoyed and criticized as such. They are not alone in their alternate writing approaches, but they make for excellent extreme cases to examine the advantages of such experimentation, while also recognizing what they do not provide that traditional art historical texts consistently do offer.

At the center of *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, T.J. Clark delivers a polemic on the dissolution of the visual into the verbal. He argues that interpreting images through a political lens has had the unfortunate effect of mistaking images for political signs. Clark’s attentive viewing of two Poussin paintings attempts to see anew, to find ways yet beyond John Berger’s 1968-radical *Ways of Seeing*, and beyond the social history that Clark introduced into art history in 1973 with *Image of the People*.

Politics have played a part in art criticism since its censored origins. The Académie Française, founded in 1648, and the British Royal Academy, founded in 1768, were governed by

---

24 As quoted in Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 40.
royal charter, and thus each nation’s king sponsored the Salons or Exhibitions of the members’
work. Deference to the king kept criticism from open condemnation, especially since
publications required royal consent. Diderot was able to write freely, in part because he had a
limited readership of a few dozen, but also because they were all located outside of Paris and the
list of readers kept secret. English criticism often resorted to pseudonyms to avoid
condemnation. The French Revolution permitted a period of diversity and free speech. The rise
of Napoleon brought new censorship, but because cultural writings were less governed, they
became an outlet for veiled political commentary. The rapidly changing political landscape in
France after the Second Revolution in 1848, and through the 1850s, made art a foil for political
allegiances. The rise of Realism, later, was partly tied to modernism’s growing interest in the
working class, just as, a century later, Abstract Expressionism would be encouraged by the
United States government to highlight democracy’s freedoms in contrast to the stringent
regulations of Soviet Communism. The great 19th Century English art critic John Ruskin
condemned the price of art as a part of his socialist concerns late in life, an attitude that is still
vociferously expressed in today’s literature. The cultural revolutions of 1968 introduced a slew
of socio-political concerns about the ideological content of art, its materials, as well as the artist’s
practice. Art criticism today is steeped in these political concerns, despite various attempts to
stem that tide.

---

25 Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 28. La Font de Saint-Etienne wrote about the 1746 Salon, condemning
the frivolous depictions of François Boucher and advocated “patriotic models of resistance to what he saw as a
despotic culture.” His incendiary remarks, correctly interpreted as a criticism of the government and court that
enjoyed the exuberance of Rococo, created such fervor that the Académie canceled the 1749 Salon to limit further
criticism. In the 1750s the Salons were reinstated, but the king censored all unregulated writing about the Salons.
26 ibid., 30.
27 ibid., 31.
28 I am thinking here of Tom Wolfe’s *The Painted Word* and Roger Kimball’s *The Rape of the Masters*, but even
books that are not opposed to the various socio-political theories of the last forty years often suggest limiting
political interpretations of art.
T.J. Clark revolutionized art with his clear argument for the significance of social politics to art, and yet, in *The Sight of Death*, he halts the overt political discussion around art, which he recognizes has become its own political agenda, to argue for another kind of looking. I argue that the journal format allowed Clark to break out of the socio-political, art historical discourse by offering an alternate writing style, one that permits uncertainty, confusion, meandering, rather than the battle cry of the revolutionary. The poems that also appear remind him that language is filled with ambiguities, and that the very beauty of poetry is its work between indicative, conditional, and potential meaning, none of which individually analyzed can articulate the complex of the whole. Expecting images to be revelatory ignores the way images also conceal. Writing the poems highlights the turn his writing takes from the pictures, to the political, to the deeply personal, and back to the picture on the wall, linking these approaches rather than insisting on their distinction.

Just as the political in art criticism has ebbed and flowed, so has its writing style. Diderot’s “casual, seemingly effortless, and frequently lighthearted style, that depended largely upon virtuosic descriptions,” but included anecdotes and tangents, “forged a new style of writing.”29 The French critics, Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Guillaume Apollinaire, and others were deeply influenced by him, and influenced others, creating a lineage that succinctly flows from Diderot.30 The two major English critics of the 19th Century, William Hazlitt and John Ruskin, may now seem to match the conversational tone of the French critics, but E.H. Gombrich notes instead that Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* was “the most ambitious work

30 American criticism would not find its own voice until Clement Greenberg, and though Germany, Russia, and other parts of the world certainly wrote about art, the history of art criticism focuses on London and Paris, whose art exhibits and consequent criticism define how the West conceives the rise of art and art history.
of scientific art criticism ever attempted.” Gombrich’s verdict also places Ruskin’s effort as steps towards the split between art criticism and art history. Roger Fry’s interest in including non-Western art into the art historical discourse and Clive Bell’s 1914 *Art* used analytic approaches that established a mode of discussion in English criticism and stemmed poetic dalliances in the writing.

The conversational and personal criticism continued in France in Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Marcel Proust, André Breton, and others. They still valued “subjectivity and suggestion [rather] than objectivity and definitiveness.” A return to poetic criticism appeared in the United States during the 1960s within the new editorial vision of Thomas Hess for the magazine *ARTnews*. This period of *ARTnews* “offered a novel turn towards belle-lettristic criticism....[and] employed a language that much more associative than anything that Diderot had penned.” Hess published essays by established scholars, but recruited poets, including John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Rexroth, and James Schuyler, to write with great expression, resulting in pieces that were often abstract, and used similes and analogies with enthusiasm.

Charles Simic’s *Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* returns to this exuberance and exemplifies the statement made by Harold Bloom, likely inspired by Baudelaire’s similar comment, that “all criticism is prose poetry.” Simic’s brief texts evoke prose poems in style, but include extracts from Cornell’s journals, and suggest figures whose

---

31 As quoted by David Barrie’s introduction to *Modern Painters*, 13.
32 Virginia Woolf’s oft-quoted remark that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” may allude to the “Manet and the Post-Impressionist” art exhibit organized by Fry, Bell, and Desmond McCarthy. Clive Bell’s 1914 *Art* declared the principles of “significant form.” They lay the groundwork for Clement Greenberg’s much maligned formalism of the 1950s in New York City.
33 Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 49.
34 Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 58. Houston’s introduction offers an excellent, but brief, overview of this period at *ARTnews*.
35 Bloom, Harold, *Anxiety of Influence*, 95. Baudelaire wrote that the greatest criticism might be a sonnet or an elegy.
ideas influenced or appealed to Cornell. The texts do not describe Cornell’s work or life in any explicit manner but introduce associations through imaginative language. Here, I argue that the imaginative is necessary to a critical reception of art. The imagination is not at odds with reason, but a parallel pathway to art, one that mitigates the time-and-space, cause-and-effect predicates that reason establishes for “reality.” New elements in the work and changes in the viewer’s vision of the work are possible with a new attitude—“a more fictive and playful form of description may do better justice to our chosen objects than a recourse to painstaking historicism.”

Greenberg and formalism, minimalism and theory in general, changed the tone of American criticism, resulting in the dense locutions now common. The cultural and political revolutions around the world made looking at art a serious concern, rife with possible gender, class, and race discriminations. The world was and remains a heartbreakingly serious place, but an imaginative space seems to be opening. In the last twenty years, a scattering of texts have appeared that embrace the personal and the poetic. T.J. Clark and Charles Simic’s respective texts are the foci of this elliptical section, but Daniel Arasse’s 2000 On n’y voit rien (translated in 2013 by Alyson Waters as Take a Closer Look), Peter de Bolla’s 2003 Art Matters, Siri Hustvedt’s 2005 Mysteries of the Rectangle, and Bruce Hainley’s 2014 Under the Sign of [sic], suggest an emerging interest in the experience with art, not merely the thought about it.

Aesthetics is often contrasted to politics, either as an escape from life or a renewal of it. The avant garde collapse of art into life was meant to destroy the distinction, or meant to put in question the political ambivalence of aesthetics, or reject the atrocities of the early 20th

---

Century’s politics, among other arguments. Whether art is autonomous, or should be, has been at the core of most art movements for the last century. The desire to have art and politics be distinct is as understandable as having them united. Overtly political art is often obvious and consequently dull, and the recent aestheticization of politics (in terms of a politician’s “image” both figurative and figural, and the media controlled presentation of political choices) is deeply disturbing. They should somehow remain separate. And yet, when art is entirely cut from life, it can become decadent, irrelevant, or elitist. Likewise, writing about art that is solely political loses sight of the art, as Clark decries, while exclusively imaginative renderings do the same. Not only the art, but the writing on art, is challenged to be both stylistic and meaningful. Fiction about art offers a space where art and politics can mingle, where art history and a specific life intertwine, and provides a fascinating glimpse at our own experience with art, one that is rarely clearly merely aesthetic, politic, or political.

The second section, “Literary Ekphrases as Art History and Theory,” asks why fiction, prose and poetry, can not be considered a part of the history of a work of art. I have always found it curious that a work of art’s appearance in a poem, story, novel, play, movie, song, etc., is rarely considered a part of the art work’s historical “life.” Would the attendance lines for “Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Hals: Masterpieces of Dutch Painting from the Mauritshuis,” the 2013 show at the Frick Museum in New York City, have been so long if not, in part, for the bestselling novel by Tracy Chevalier, The Girl with the Pearl Earring? Would the museum have put that painting on its t-shirt with the show tour dates, as if the painting were itself a rock star, catapulted to fame

37 Preziosi, Rethinking Art History, 35-6. Preziosi explains how the presumption that objects have a life of their own tacitly legitimates an empiricist status, “investing it with an pregiven ontological status, an otherness that is and must be autonomous of the analytic subject.” He goes on to describe how this a descendent of the panopticism that “has served as the dominant metaphor during the establishment, institutionalization, and systematization of the disciplines of Western education.”
by an auspicious review in a bestselling book? Whatever attitudes taken to the literary value of the book, Chevalier’s story helped expand Vermeer’s audience. Fiction influences our perception of art, artists, and art periods, and deserves a closer look as an influence upon, if not itself a form of, art writing.

David Carrier analyzes the change from descriptive artwriting to interpretive in his book *Principles of Art History Writing*, where he finds that art history follows a narrative formula not entirely dissimilar to the arc of a work of fiction.\(^{38}\) Representations of artworks must “construct a plausible story with an apt beginning, a convincing discussion of alternative approaches, and a conclusion that achieves narrative closure.”\(^{39}\) Interpretation that has abandoned physical description in art writing depends on structured methodologies and systems of classification to maintain boundaries around the discourse, lest it fly off on imaginative leaps. The associative, though often astute, perceptions of the imagination are disguised for the art historian, though Carrier demonstrates they are still present: “A good interpretation must be true to the facts, plausible, and original. Writing such art-historical interpretations is a creative activity, for the facts alone do not tell the artwriter how to emplot her narrative.”\(^{40}\)

Much work has been done on the “the language of art history and its metaphorical geometry,” so instead of examining art-historical writings, my second section “Literary Ekphrases as Art History and Theory” offers additional texts to the art history library.\(^{41}\) The poems, short stories, and novels introduce the complexity of looking at art through characters’ reactions to specific art works and the works’ placement in the narrative. These texts can help

\(^{38}\) David Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 109. They are not indistinguishable. Ekphrasis works metaphorically by recreating the image in words. An interpretation, argues Carrier, works metonymically, by assigning priority to parts in order to illuminate the whole.

\(^{39}\) David Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, 240.

\(^{40}\) ibid., 7.

\(^{41}\) Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 19.
readers learn about art, its affects and effects, and so subtly informs general attitudes about art, as well as certain art works. These non-art historical writings can encourage new perspectives in the work of art history.

Reception aesthetics has been half-heartedly received among literary critics (let alone within the academic sphere of art) partly caused by methodological obstacles of dominant schools such as historicism, textual criticism, or even Adorno’s critical theory. Empirical studies had sociological or psychological value, but were largely dismissed as irrelevant to literary or aesthetic understanding. Reader-response theory articulated a number of different readers (ideal, implied, virtual, real, historical, resisting, critical, and super-readers), where the meaning of the text is derived from the reader’s process of reading rather than existing as a product inherent to the text. Some readers belong to interpretive communities and therefore have a set of interpretive strategies for producing a reading (properties they seek, intentions they accept), which therefore shape the meaning they find. Hans Robert Jauss argued for the role that expectation plays in interpretation, arguing that literary history is not a series of facts but a record of subjective readings. In *The Acts of Reading* (1978), Wolfgang Iser expanded Wayne Booth’s argument in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961)—that the author’s intention cannot be determined but can be inferred—to suggest that texts have guidelines and instructions that a careful reader can discern to assemble the text’s meaning, making interpretation a meeting between the reader and the text. The reader must learn and identify codes, which interrogate customary codes and expectations brought to the experience, “violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes for understanding.”

---

“Literary Ekphrases as Art History and Theory” examines three texts to observe how the art work influences the text in which it is placed, how the relationship between art and text influences the reader, and how art within a fiction addresses longstanding theoretical issues of aesthetics. Charles Swann’s unfinished work on Vermeer in Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* reveals how a painting mentioned only in passing summarizes the entirety of Swann’s failed artistic existence. The reader’s own lack of knowledge is a mirror of Swann’s, but once revealed becomes an encouragement to learn more. Through the text (visual or verbal), the reader/viewer discovers herself. The reader/viewer, who has discovered herself, must then return to the text to participate in reading, seeing, and thinking. William Carlos Williams’ ten-part poem “Pictures from Breugel” provides an opportunity to observe how the reader is invited to participate in a verbal-visual back and forth, for example in the way the poem of the painting “Parable of the Blind” introduces a false element that forces us to look again. The final section exceeds the efforts of the first two by investigating art theory as it appears in novels.

Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* has several characters struggle with a silent film work of Douglas Gordon and guides us to reconsider the issues of representation that have plagued art and aesthetics since Plato. Three characters struggle to maintain a distinction between art and reality, but their strident efforts also force the collapse of the distinction between the two. Where Rachel Kushner’s 2013 *The Flamethrowers* organizes her novel around fascist and anarchic *avant-garde* attempts at the dissolution of art and life, *Point Omega* places the confused dissolution in the hyper media “News and Traffic” world of the 21st Century and the United States invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11. DeLillo identifies a national psychosis derived from the inability to manage how art and life merge and separate. He and Kushner are not alone
in this concern. Michael Frayn’s 2000 *Headlong*, Paul Auster’s 2002 *Book of Illusions*, Will Self’s 2006 *The Book of Dave*, and Michael Gruber’s 2008 *The Forgery of Venus*, just to name a few within the Anglo-American publishing world, are recent examples of fiction’s attempt to warn us of the dangers in the avant garde dream to dissolve art and reality, while they also insist on the necessary distinction of art from life, and encourage us to negotiate that fine line.

In *Point Omega*, one character’s essay on the word “rendition” reveals that words cannot be defined unconditionally, but vary by context and acceptance within the group. I conclude therefore by suggesting the discourse on art can shift away from issues of representation (particularly as the figurative is opposed to the abstract) and its tensions with reality by adopting the word “rendition.” Renditions operate both by reference to some original and as their own singular production. The word’s use can remind us that we live in this middle space, neither in a simulacrum nor in some stable reality. Only through the effort of interpreting our stance to both can we negotiate our indefinite and undefined presence, as spectators of art, life, and ourselves.

Much of my work interpreting art works within the following fictions extends art history’s interest in “the ‘what’ of signification rather than the ‘how’—the historical circumstances of the artistic work, and the complex mechanism by which it is engendered.”43 The latter would undoubtedly contribute to this study by opening comparisons between creative challenges faced by the artist and those of a character, narrator, or author, widening the social import of the art work and the textual person to each other. I address this briefly in my reading of Vermeer’s *Diana and her Companions* in “Proust’s Provocation: Vermeer, Swann, and the Reader,” but the other texts avoid this largely in consideration of space. Since my argument in

43 Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 49.
part suggests that fiction is part of the social history of art, then those methodologies of social historical study would be usefully employed here. For now, however, I wanted to show that an art work in fiction is an entry point to learning more about the art work, and therefore into the study of art history and theory.

The role of ekphrasis—and of art history—is to make the reader or the listener ‘see’ more than they saw before, when they encounter the object next. The search for words to make us ‘see’ is at the heart of the creative struggle against the ways in which what we have learnt can go stale, and it is an attempt to open to the new.

My literary analyses of the art in the context of the text are akin to the efforts of social history to show how art is produced and influenced by its historical context. In this way, I am reinforcing an argument that the arts (fine art and literature most obviously) are “a second reality alongside the world in which we live today,” which “legitimizes art as essentially a mode of private entertainment, a dreamworld to soften the jarring complexities and contradictions of the past and present.” By examining art inside literature, however, I am also introducing art as a third reality, one which leads to a fourth, and fifth, and so on. It’s turtles all the way down. The complexities and contradictions multiply, perhaps exhaustingly, but these alternate realities provide an alternate perspective upon the physical life where we sit, stand, and struggle with what we see and think about the world in which we find ourselves awakened. Will Self speaks of his own ekphrastic efforts in *The Book of Dave* as an attempt at “something altogether richer and more satisfying: an integration of reader and viewer, the text as a portal through which a public user or

---

44 My work on William Carlos Williams’ “Corn Harvest” examines historic attitudes about peasant work and Williams’ own long days, while “Adoration of the Kings” and “Wedding Dance in the Open Air” look at Williams interest in “old masters” as it relates to his comments on Brueghel’s relationship to the Renaissance. Both articles are in submission.


46 Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 49.
artwork can be re-framed.” A case study of a museum caption project takes the ideas of the first two sections to observe text’s role within that most public art space, the museum.

Why can’t the museum introduce personal, creative, imaginative and informed responses to works of art? The last section, “The Writing on the Wall,” will argue that it can. The first part looks at language in the museum, which is where we generally spend the most time looking at art and thinking about it—though not necessarily, as many studies show and will be discussed. Past and present museum practice for wall labels provides context for the truly radical Tate Modern Bigger Picture caption project, which invites members of the extended Tate community to contribute a personal response to a work in the permanent collection. The captions appear alongside the more traditional wall text, but offer an array of reactions to works, informed, humorous, personal, poetic, descriptive, delighted, as well as the steps the viewer took in the process of discovering a new-found appreciation for the work. Each of these contributors brings a personal background; as the artist Joseph Kosuth says, “seeing isn’t as simple as looking: the text the viewer brings to a work organizes what is seen.” (Barolsky et al 408). The little-known project is an admirable attempt to engage audiences with old works in new ways, to help these audiences express what they see.

Tate Modern’s decision to include voices of museum supporters, volunteers, and attendees responding to a piece in the permanent collection deserves acknowledgment for its aim to address the modular and multi-perspective world of the 21st century. Tate Modern has not, however, articulated a theoretical framework to support the project, and so this chapter adapts Charles Garoian’s notion of “Performing the Museum” to reveal effects the captions have on a

---

viewer’s engagement with the works. Two captions will be specifically examined to discuss the
effect of interdisciplinarity and the importance of critical thinking. Understanding the
significance of Tate Modern’s shift in label writing is particularly relevant in the United States,
where the importance of the individual voice is the very basis of the republic democracy.

There is a political angle to this study, one which I address within the conclusion. The
following begins however from the suggestion that imaginative writings about art are really
wonderful—that is, full of wonder—and can expand beyond our vision of art, our thoughts on
reality, and even, beliefs about ourselves. These authors show us how they see rather than simply
what they see, and so reveal the advantages and dangers in their choices, recommending that we
see what’s going on as well, where to see really does mean both a visual ability and an articulate
response.
Art is the image of an image of an image
More vacant, more transparent
With each repeat and slough:
    one skin, two skins, it comes clear,
An old idea is not that old.

—from “Summer Storm” by Charles Wright
CHAPTER II.1
“VIEWER LIKE ME”:
T.J. CLARK’S T.J. CLARK’S THE SIGHT OF DEATH, AN EXPERIMENT IN ART WRITING

What is novel is the extreme care in rendering
The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface
(It is the first mirror portrait),
So that you could be fooled for a moment
Before you realize the reflection
Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room. We have surprised him
At work, but no, he has surprised us
As he works.

-from “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” by John Ashbery

“A REACTION...NOT A THEORY”: INTRODUCING THE EXPERIMENT

George Poulet begins his essay “Phenomenology of Reading” by introducing an open
book on the table. He concludes by recommending an open mind, one willing to risk trusting its
experience with the text. Peter de Bolla used that approach in his book Art Matters (2003),
where he approaches three different art works acknowledging, only to then excise, the social
from his aesthetic experience. When the great social art historian T.J. Clark wrote in The Sight of
Death that “one kind of corrective to dogma is looking itself, pursued long enough. Paintings are
capable of getting in the way of our framing of them,” he seemed to be adopting a similar

formalist engagement. Clark might agree with Poulet’s erudite sentiment and de Bolla’s inclination, but Clark’s reasons for doing so are dramatically different from those espoused by de Bolla.

De Bolla begins his discussion of Barnett Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* with the questions, “how does this painting determine my address to it, and in so doing, what does that address do, for me and for the painting?” in order to ascertain, “what does it mean, represent, what is it trying to say,” and arrive at: “what does the painting know?” These questions assume meaning, while Clark wants to discover what can be experienced in a visual exploration, dismissing meaning as the reason for investigation. Many critics were appalled by Clark’s seeming abandonment of the social politics he had helped establish with *Image of the People* (1973), but Clark’s text has none of the absolute aesthetic stance that de Bolla cultivates.

When de Bolla writes about Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, he insists on its sublime distance, whereas Clark starts his examination from not knowing why Poussin’s paintings move him the way they do. Though de Bolla claims to offer “a detailed examination of my experience looking at a work of visual art,” Clark’s journal makes de Bolla’s examination a mere report on his seeing. Clark dates and locates his moments of looking, whereas de Bolla never does. Clark wants a return to thoughtful observation of art, such as de Bolla offers, but does so not for some abstract pleasure in the sublime serenity of art, but for the political importance of that act of vision.

---

52 I am suggesting that Clark’s book is a kind of response to de Bolla, even though Clark was writing in 2001-2 and the reader of de Bolla’s book cannot know when his moments of seeing occurred, noting only the 2003 publication date. Perhaps the two critics were engaged in acts of viewership at the same time; we cannot be sure.
In a series of journal entries mostly produced during his tenure as a Getty Research Fellow, T.J. Clark presents his reactions to Poussin’s *Landscape with a Calm* (1650-1), which belonged to the Getty, and *Landscape with a Snake Killing a Man* (1648), which was on loan from the National Gallery in London. Almost daily between January 20 and April 24, 2000, Clark’s entries describe in staggering detail what he sees. *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* is “a vivid immersion in the author’s process of discovery.” Clark presents, questions, and discusses his findings, returning to his conclusions in future entries. Elizabeth Prettejohn, in a review of the book, finds that “the diary form releases the text from the goal orientation of linear or logical narrative,” allowing Clark to observe and ruminate as an end of its own. Clark acknowledges in his opening that he “revised the entries for publication, and sometimes added to them,” nevertheless trying “not to lose hold of the first movement of things as it appears in the notebooks, the tripping from day to day.”

The diaristic “experiment in art writing,” as the subtitle of the book acknowledges, is not an unmediated unfolding of Clark’s visual experience in his daily returns to Poussin’s two paintings. They are written by a knowledgeable and deeply respected art historian whose ability to see and discern is unquestioned. The book then offers something else. In the extensive critical commentary on Virginia Woolf’s posthumously published *A Writer’s Diary*, much is made of Leonard Woolf’s cuts and edits for the sake of offering “something about the writing process...how it happens, where it happens, what it is.” Leonard Woolf explained the impetus in publishing his wife’s expurgated journal: “The diaries at least show the extraordinary energy,

---

persistence, and concentration with which she devoted herself to the art of writing and the
undeviating conscientiousness with which she wrote and rewrote and again rewrote her books.”

Likewise, Clark’s journal presents “the extraordinary energy, persistence, and concentration”
with which one might look at art.

The two paintings provide Clark with remarkable reflections, where initial leaps become
part of a wider scope, “many different, initially inconsistent responses to the subject being
explored.” The chapter starts with a brief examination of how Clark scrutinizes Poussin’s two
paintings—“What we don’t look at because we know already, or what we look at too clearly—
too categorically—for the same reason”—before turning to his concern on the verbal
representation of the visual, and his choice to include his own poetry. Clark wants to avoid any
specific goals, using his observations to reach the myriad depths of the paintings.

I want to write a reaction to my two paintings, not a theory of them. This is not a
polarized choice, I realize: no reaction without theory (and suchlike platitudes).
It’s a question of balance, of preference. I’d like to show how a theory of a
painting comes into being—how a painting, as opposed to a proposition or a
narrative or a geometric figure, instigates and directs an enquiry into ‘what it is
saying’.

What art shows cannot be simply encapsulated, termed or labeled by a scholarly or theoretical
formulation. The effort to see consistently and conscientiously is at the root of his daily

---

58 Leonard Woolf writes that *A Writer’s Diary* provides “an unusual psychological picture of artistic production from
within” and that “its product and interest naturally depend to a great extent upon the value and interest of Virginia
Woolf’s art” (Woolf AWD ix). Clark’s revealing work is of interest in no small degree because of his formidable
work in art history. His theories and ideas have been deeply influential, so his diaristic experiment is of “value and
interest” just as Woolf’s became “exemplary of the modern writer” (Briggs 1043).
60 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 60.
61 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 82-3
visitations to the gallery, but also informs his effort to write about what he sees, how it changes, what he thinks about, and how that informs him and what he sees in face of the painting.

T.J. Clark is no mere spectator. He is one of the major art historians of our time. His book on looking is not an amateur attempt but the presentation of the activity by someone who has spent the better part of his adult lifetime engaged in serious looking. He does not try to pretend otherwise, and early on addresses his academic or intellectual pursuits. Part of the challenge for him is to remain with the looking, without its necessitating a discursive answer. Instead of “an arid search for symbols and textual meanings,” Clark conveys the slowness of “looking and reflecting on looking.”

Though Clark certainly displays the process of looking, his confidence reveals knowledge about the materiality of the paintings and scholarship on the paintings, but also reasons for rejecting research, for refusing to participate in a theoretical paradigm, for disdaining the staid voice of a controlled writer. His confidence also allows him to be uncertain, to write poetry, and to confront a personal association that complicates everything he has seen. Clark models what seeing looks like when it reveals the work and the viewer, the political and the personal.

SENSITIVITY TO CIRCUMSTANCE: SEEING IN CONTEXT

The painting’s “sensitivity to circumstances” must be recognized, by which Clark means the space, location and lighting of the gallery, but also, given his socialist interests, the ownership of the paintings and his own privilege to engage with them. His tentative relationship to research also indicates his sense that too much information, sought simply for the

---

sake of accumulation, alters the circumstances of viewership and represents a lack of sensitivity
to the particulars any viewer brings to her experience. Clark discusses the quality of the paint at
length because he recognizes that the first circumstance of Poussin’s painting is precisely that it
is an oil painting. Its medium is significant, because it forms how the content is perceived
visually (texture and brushstrokes, glazes and layering), determines the painting’s ideological
status as a socio-economic symbol, and all those reasons influence how the scholarship on
Poussin developed ideas floating around the painting he observes.

We see things only roughly a lot of the time in normal life because we are
naturally inattentive: we fail to bring most of the things we have to deal with into
sharp focus; we recognize and categorize too soon, too confidently.64

On March 14, after two full months of observations, he begins by noting that “a long time
passes this morning before anything occurs to me that seems worth writing down.”65 He has
spent time, and many pages, considering aspects of the paintings—shades of color, narrative
segments, brushstrokes, the position of the spectator, and painterly ambiguities. He noticed
brushwork, “such as the long, thin swathe of green that wondrously materialises into a field
above the herd moving along the water’s edge in Calm” and incongruities like a missing
reflection in the water of a bull passing along.66

Clark believes that different viewers perceive different elements. A painter might see
Poussin’s work differently, and perhaps notice some details sooner. In Landscape with a Calm,
Clark identifies birches that fill the landscape, a “thing, effect, moment” that a “viewer like me
can notice.”67 Two other trees “standing above the washhouse in the middle distance” serve a

---

64 Clark, The Sight of Death, 60.
65 Clark, The Sight of Death, 156.
67 Clark, The Sight of Death, 23, 154, his emphasis.
different purpose; they are a “color transition” from the “yellow of the sunlit walls on either side, and to the whole stern blue of the lake.” With this awareness, he turns to Snake to see if he can find some similar function at work, but realizes that he “wouldn’t necessarily see it now” simply because he is looking for it. Sometimes, however, “first sights, and leaping involuntary identifications” are misleading assumptions, easily sustained, if not checked.

Over the period he is writing, he offers three passages of Landscape with a Snake that he find to be particular complex work, worth contemplating to see what makes them so stimulating.

…the open, horror-struck mouth; the light catching the edge of the thrown-back forearm, especially where it hits the hand and hints at the thumb; and simplest of all, blurred sequence of light greens, going right from a point just above the running man’s head, which establishes a line of grass clinging to the top of a low bank.

Poussin’s use of paint attends to both what it is choosing to represent and itself, “mouth as mouth” and “mouth as paint”; driving “the materiality of the paint up to the surface—what makes painted-ness worth relishing” is how the painting comes to offer multiple identities, so that the same brush strokes become “grass or horror or light” and viewers cannot set them “in place.”

Clark finds Poussin’s genius in his ability to offer the viewer material through both careful scrutiny and general observation. The form, the materiality of the paint, establishes “a dialogue among the elements that remains a dialogue rather than a dissolution of parts into a

---

68 Clark, The Sight of Death, 154. Clark spends a lot of time on the color blue, a hue that is the object of contemplation for many others as well. Siri Hustvedt writes that “blue may be the most weighted color in the culture—blue blood, blue chip, blue devils, blue grass, blue collar, blue movie, blue stocking, feeling blue, singing the blues. Its chromatic scale corresponds to an emotional spectrum of highly complex associations that move from the airy transparency linked with joy to the saturated depths we connect with sorrow.” Mysteries of the Rectangle, 140. Christopher Moore’s introduces a history of the color that is absolutely fascinating across his amusing art novel Sacré Bleu.

69 Clark, The Sight of Death, 155.

70 Clark, The Sight of Death, 125.

71 Clark, The Sight of Death, 127, his emphasis.
larger whole.” Deeper meanings can unfold, but they do not reject or undermine a superficial visual reaction. Looking at a painting is neither about identifying its depiction nor understanding its meaning. That dialogue resists domination through proliferating meanings rather than dissolving into one.

The shadows and lighting influence how he perceives the brushstrokes and paint colors, which heightens his awareness of the physical room in which he sees the paintings. The room has skylights to allow the California sun into the room, but also provides fluorescent ceiling fixtures for darker days. He complains that “the light is perturbing,” because the two pictures’ contrast is diminished by artificial light, which “masks the materiality, the paintedness, of the mid-distant shapes.” In discussing the light in the room, how it shifts from day to day, with the artificial light sometimes intruding (not as helpfully for Clark as it is meant), he confesses to a conception of how Poussin’s studio was lit: “I imagine (probably wrongly) Poussin’s studio light being much like this.” Los Angeles, on January 27th, 2000 at ten in the morning, had “strong L.A. sunshine” that neutralized the ceiling lamps he so clearly despises. Landscape with a Calm is on an east wall “in a steady backwater of light” so that the yellowness of the afternoon scene, exaggerated by the fluorescent lights, gets tempered. The colors and reflections of the paint are altered by lighting, reminding Clark daily of his location and the circumstances by which he can look at these two paintings for so long. Not only is he aware of looking at the paintings, but how he is looking at them, which in due course leads to why he is looking.

---

73 Clark, The Sight of Death, 18.
74 ibid., 31.
75 His fiction regarding Poussin’s studio shows the way that any long-term viewer begins to have notions of the scene in which the painting was produced, expanded upon from the painting itself. Amusingly, he recognizes that his suppositions are based in no facts and so are likely wrong, but he doesn’t allow that to quell his imagination. By putting the probability that he is wrong in parentheses, he can permit it sideways.
Clark acknowledges that his Getty research fellowship endows him with the luxury for his extended looking. The research fellowship was granted to write a book on Picasso’s work between the two world wars, and Clark is nervous about his shift in focus, his unexpected dwelling on Poussin’s two paintings. The economics of Clark’s extended looking are not to be dismissed. Clark’s upfront statement of the reasons for his presence at the Getty, I believe, are an acknowledgement of the luxury he is allowed. He has the privilege to receive an endowed research fellowship which supports his time spent reflecting on paintings.76 The decades of Clark’s established career provide the knowledge, patience, confidence and ability to see the same painting repeatedly without becoming disoriented or overwhelmed by his varied responses.

His social circles and networks converse with him, offering alternate ideas, histories, or stories, sharing books and their own procured knowledge. He can request information in a private discussion with a curator or conservator, or view archived materials.77 Clark’s ability to travel not only allows him to see many of Poussin’s works but works by other artists in conversation with the ones he is considering, a circumstance for his viewing that is undoubtedly to the benefit of his looking, his ability to discuss, and therefore our reading.78 These economic

76 Most museums are open during work hours, from 10am to 5 or 6pm. This limits weekday audiences to those who either must not work, or those whose work permits them flexible hours. Museums are open on weekends, but this already reduces the multiple weekly viewings that Clark can enjoy, which a typical working audience member would not. The Getty is fortunately free so all visitors can come and go as they please, but many museums are not, and this also curtails many visitors’ ability to revisit works. John Lysaker wrote about the elite economics of an intellectual life: “First, in reflecting upon art, one plays the role of the intellectual, a class that often takes itself to be more insightful or cultured than others while simultaneously trying to prove, even sell, its relevance, to those for whom reflection has little exchange value and thus little value altogether. Second, insofar as it seeks something other than the naked reproduction of existence, a process evident in the production of generic types (a paper cup, a pound of bacon, a Monet coffee cup) or the manufacture of pure commodities (bare entities enlivened by capital), the work of art occupies a social position similar to the intellectual and her reflections. And yet, these labors, seemingly at odds with business as usual, are possible in part because capital enables them, say in the form of a publishing house, a university endowment, a museum and its revenues, a gallery’s ventures and so forth.” John T. Lysaker, “Extolling Art in an Intolerable World,” The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, New Series, 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 45.


78 These are only some of the reasons why Clark is surely aware of the privileged position he maintains in being able to have the experience that led to his experiment in art writing. Most potential visitors do not have these advantages, limiting their interest or engagement with the art.
advantages cannot be disregarded as they lay the groundwork for his perceptions. His background in the social politics of art history make him aware his privileged viewing is akin to the privilege of ownership.

Clark includes information on one of Poussin’s committed patrons, a financier named Jean Pointel, who owned both *Snake* and *Calm*. This conviction stems from Félibien’s comment in his biography of the artist that Poussin wrote Pointel a letter, confirming that he finished *Snake*, and which describes the depiction as showing “calm and serene weather.” This letter, along with most of Poussin’s correspondence, has been lost, but references such as that by Félibien, indicate that he spoke familiarly about his patron, suggestive of friendship. When Pointel lost his fortune, dying in “straightened circumstances,” his executors found that he had kept most of his purchased and commissioned collection of twenty-one Poussin paintings.\(^\text{79}\) In the appendix, Clark includes the executors’ descriptions of those paintings, a small ode to the passion that Pointel maintained for Poussin’s paintings.\(^\text{80}\)

Clark has a base of knowledge, but mostly avoids research information as a distraction from the project of looking, as Daniel Arasse writes in *Take a Closer Look*, “I don’t need texts to see what’s happening in the painting.”\(^\text{81}\) Early on, Clark expects his observations to come to a natural end, but for that reason finds himself walking the long way around the museum “out of fear—silly writer’s fear—” that he would no longer find anything to discuss upon seeing the pictures again, “as if it would have mattered...”\(^\text{82}\) He identifies the fear as particularly a writer’s fear, since his job is to write what he sees. In this particular instance, however, he is also trying to

---

\(^\text{80}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 85-6. Clark imagines the financier’s reasons for keeping the works in his poem “Pointel to Posterity,” which will be discussed alongside the other poems Clark writes.
overcome all the inculcated ways of seeing, and worries that if he is done with his own visual exploration that he will have to turn to the extensive art historical research on Poussin.

Clark had avoided writing on Poussin’s *Landscape with a Snake* because he found the professional, analytic work required of the art historian to be a disservice to this work of art, and perhaps the artist, as well.

My favorite remark of Poussin’s—the phrase that seems to me to get closer to the heart of his self-consciousness than any other—is a simple throwaway in one of his letters: “Moy qui fais profession des choses muettes” (“I who make a profession of mute things”). I did not think that those of us whose profession is the opposite had usually served Poussin well.\(^\text{83}\)

The journal entries actively avoid research but, in being able to quote from the artist’s letters, Clarks reveals his deep knowledge of the painter. Over the course of the entries, he responds to ideas about Poussin that other scholars have had. He may not be actively researching, but he is not a novice to the artist. His appreciation of the quote lies in the contrast between the artist’s efforts at silent revelation and the work of the art historian whose ekphrastic enterprise is to speak out about (and some might think for) the painting. According to Clark, Poussin has not been well served by the endeavor of art historical research and interpretation.

One of the reasons that Clark is attempting this alternate pathway to the picture is his concern that too often art historians are “looking for an incident, an interruption in the visual fabric, on which words could fasten and begin.”\(^\text{84}\) He points out that most writers struggling with *Landscape with a Calm* gravitate towards the galloping horse, or focus on the glistening, coiled

\(^{83}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 3, his parenthetical. Daniel Arasse speaks to the same concern: “you sometimes seem to want—at all costs—to put up between you and the work, a sort of sun filter to shield you from the work and safeguard the acquired habits on which our academic community agrees and in which it recognizes itself. This isn’t the first time our opinions have different, but this time I am writing to you. Not really with the hope of winning you over to my point of view but perhaps with that of making you question your firmly held beliefs, and of shaking up certain convictions that, in my opinion, are blinding you.” Daniel Arasse, *Take a Closer Look*, 3.

\(^{84}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 4.
snake in *Landscape with a Man Being Killed by a Snake*. These points of entry are too obvious. If “an interpretation unveils the mechanisms of the painting, how it works on the viewer, how it reveals its visual world—the rhythms, accents, and suggested movements,” then Clark is curious about the last two but does not expect to “unveil” the painting.85

In his review of *The Sight of Death*, the philosopher of art Arthur Danto objects to Clark’s easy dismissal of the snake.86 Clark does examine the snake’s glistening appearance, the coiled body, the placement in shadow, and even proposes to learn about some “snake lore in the background here,” though later acknowledges that he never did.87 Intrigued by some of Clark’s associations regarding the snake, Danto finds Clark’s text “pretty meagre harvest for six months of intense looking” because Clark does research and explain his intuitions about the snake.88 The reviewer for *The Art Book*, Francis Halsall, is similarly disappointed to discover in Clark’s overall work “no particular attempt to decode a complex schema of iconography.”89

Halsall and Danto’s objections are precisely what Clark’s text intended to avoid doing. As Clark writes in his reply to Danto, “pictures can present worlds that do not cohere, that do not add up to a totalized understanding, without this being felt as a ‘disappointment.’”90 The book’s aim was in fact to investigate just such a discomfort. Sometimes a work of art does suddenly reveal “what the picture is of—deeply essentially” but largely that is what “as interpreters, we

87 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 152.
make happen.” Clark aimed to avoid forcing a conclusion such as he perceives occur in works of art history, even the great scholarship.

If Danto was hoping for Clark to reveal something new about the two Poussin paintings, Clark often hopes for the same. He thought about which scholars he could read, and how to read their articles, but chose to resist the impulse.

I think the test, or point, of art-historical writing is whether it manages to change one’s view of the work of art it centers on. But reading the scholarship with that test in mind, consciously, preponderantly—“go on then, change my view!”—is hopeless, pompous.

He later admits he is “prone to do just that,” and then be bored or dissatisfied after accepting another’s convictions. The desire to be influenced by another scholar stems not only from a laziness that resists developing an independent interpretation, but is also deeply egotistic. Rather than focusing on the painting, the scholar focuses on her own desire to know. Clark resists the temptation to read about the artist or the paintings until he finds a reason that will compel him to do so with interest.

Clark does not discuss the work of other scholars, not to reject their studies, but because they lack the poignancy that draws him to the paintings. The scholarly solutions are not satisfying expressions of seeing Poussin’s paintings. Clarks does not identify the three characters “lurking in the shade by the lakeshore” of Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake as fisherman, which Diderot determined they were and have thus been accepted ever since; he refuses “to take my cue” from the first critic’s work on Poussin. He mentions Félibien and quotes from his Entretiens. He considers Louis Marin and Erwin Panofsky, finding their ideas engrossing, but

91 ibid., 42.
92 Clark, The Sight of Death, 53.
inapplicable to his quest. He says about another critic, “Denis Mahon is wrong.” Clark is not convinced by these researchers’ concerns or solutions to Poussin's works, needing to formulate his own question(s). Only through the circumstances of his sight can he develop his inquiry.

Eventually, he finds “a ‘scholarly’ question that seems to matter” where “this is one where I can envisage the answer improving things.” He does not state what his question in the entries. Rather than seeking answers in the “world of texts surrounding Poussin’s pictures,” his visual exploration develops “a better set of questions to ask of them.” His questions are better because they do not repeat previous investigations, thereby seeking confirmation or validation. They are formulated within the challenges of his contemporary context. He does not state his questions of Poussin’s work nor elaborate on the research surrounding the paintings, which leaves his reader to seek her own questions. Clark’s close investigation of the two Poussin paintings changes what he notices in looking at art, and how he thinks about writing on art.

**THE VISUAL POLITICS OF SIGHT OF DEATH**

Clark finds that other scholars’ interpretations dismiss the difference between the mode of a verbal scholar and that of a visual work of art. He affirms his individual inquiry by rejecting research. His concern about seeing things for himself, however, also means that he is rejecting

---

96 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 133. Sir Denis Mahon wrote several iconographic readings of Poussin.
97 Clark does not mention a fascinating and illuminating article that compares Diderot’ and Fénelon’s writings on Poussin’s *Landscape with a Snake*, because he is avoiding the literature. But, I encourage any reader to pursue the article by Walter E. Rex, “The Landscape Demythologized: From Poussin’s Serpents to Fénelon’s ‘Shades,’ and Diderot’s Ghost,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 4 (1997): 401—19.
98 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 30. Clark’s use of “improve” is unfortunate etymologically speaking. “Improve” carries from its Latin root *improbare* the meaning to condemn, reject, disapprove, stemming from *improbus*, meaning bad. The term then very much contains the judgments that Clark will in a few entires condemn as a “hopeless, pompous” attitude towards reading scholarship.
seeing the Poussin paintings simply within the social politics that he affirmed at the beginning of his career. His desire for the book “to be about what occurs in front of paintings more or less involuntarily, not what I think ought to occur,” makes him worry when “an idea of what I should try to write about” appears and takes this event as “not a good sign.”\(^\text{100}\) Becoming fixated on one idea or vision of the work would undermine his desire to keep the work open to interpretation. He fears losing “a multiplicity of perspectives,” getting mired in the research of art scholarship, or the disciplined mannerisms of a theoretical approach.\(^\text{101}\)

The tension of writing about art is made particularly complicated by the difference in the two media. Language and art, when described through sign systems, appear to be similar, but Clark presents the washerwoman in *Snake* as an “emblem” for how semiology cannot satisfy the complexity of the art experience.

This kind of experience—seeing an aspect, seeing its semantic charge, then seeing how the aspect and the charge are inseparable from many other vectors in the representation, and must never have *been* separable...

The figure of the washerwoman seems to me to be an emblem of this—of the way that any particular form, or direction, or kind of spatiality in an artwork of this intensity *always stands at the crossroads between very different semantic worlds* [...] balancing these various possibilities, maybe, supporting them, embracing them.\(^\text{102}\)

The variant interpretations of an aspect of the painting are precisely why semantics are not the key to a final revelation. The form’s multiple possible semantic charges instead relates “very different semantic worlds,” without that plurality undermining the work’s interest but complicating the requirement of “painting, like human activities in general, having to mean something.”\(^\text{103}\) Language works towards meaning, while art does not in the same way. Clark will

\(^{100}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 133.


\(^{102}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 133, his italics.

\(^{103}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 163.
find how poetry provides language a multiplicity similar to that which he finds in fine art, but his argument here is focused on the analytic and descriptive prose of art historical writing.

The scholar’s work has a heteronomous relationship to the art. The visual technique of Poussin’s paintings and the verbal descriptions of the scholars’ texts can have a relationship of content to one another but remain radically different as forms. This difference is often ignored in discussions of meaning, even when the speakers recognize that form influences content. A painting and a text, however, are not homogeneous, and yet neither are they autonomous of one another (as Clark showed in his concern that reading the scholarship might influence what he could see). Heteronomy undermines autonomy by forcing relations to exist in and despite difference.104 Accepting irresolvable difference becomes therefore an ethical component to combating totalitarian assimilation: “Racism never detects the particles of the other; it propagates waves of sameness until those who resist identification have been wiped out.”105 This insistence on difference therefore has an important socio-political dynamic. Clark maintains throughout The Sight of Death that “some visual configurations are harder to put into words than others” and considers the possibility that “there is an ethical, or even political, point to that elusiveness—whether we’d be better calling it resistance than elusiveness.”106

Language cannot be developed to reduce the destabilization that occurs when confronting something Other, for example art or music. In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari

---

104 Robert Porter, Deleuze and Guattari: Aesthetics and Politics (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 47.  
105 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 178. Porter, in Deleuze and Guattari, discusses Charles Taylor’s argument for “a language of perspicuous contrast;” that rejects mono-cultural identity by developing and encouraging multiculturalism as a means of “militating againsts the immorality or racism that can follow from being ethnocentrically immured by one’s own cultural values,” supports racist values of sameness according to Deleuze and Guattari. They argue that terms of culture by which others can be understood as participating in culture develops a multiculturalism that is based within a regime of sameness. Porter, Deleuze and Guattari, 50.  
106 Clark, The Sight of Death, 184.
extend Lacan’s theories of the gaze and identity to address the larger social implications of cultural assimilation. Difference is revealed when One faces the Other, so long as the Other is not subsumed into a politics of “making the other more like me.”¹⁰⁷ The face of the Other presents the realization that things exist completely undefined by the One self, with Others utterly unlike anything One can comprehend, as words are to images and vice versa. One does not contemplate the depths of the Other—all the words of a dictionary cannot sum a picture. Instead, the Other is described superficially, seen as a simple surface, rather than a complexity with many layers.

Deleuze and Guattari will refer to this superficiality as regarding the face rather than developing associations with the head—a visual metaphor to represent depth. This facialization is an “overcoding” and “machinic operation” that can work upon the entire body, and make any body part a superficial object to be fetishized, desired as an idealized form.¹⁰⁸ In our example, this fetishization occurs in the impassioned exclamations that no language can be formed to express the beauty of art. The superficial constancy of the face is maintained by enforcing rules and standards. These rules create a semblance of homogeneity. The propensity for similarity encourages assimilation and thus constitutes a majority-aimed politics; for example, rules get made about the hierarchy of artistic genres, and what is art, thereby accepting anything willing to be circumscribed by the regulations, and rejecting anything different. The majority must subsume any minority movement that “charts a particular and critical deviation from the model.”¹⁰⁹ Much has been written about how all radical movements become absorbed into the status quo, often due to the extended explanations given to the radical works by sympathetic

¹⁰⁷ Porter, Deleuze and Guattari, 52.
¹⁰⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 170.
¹⁰⁹ Porter, Deleuze and Guattari, 55. Clark mentions his admiration for W.G. Sebald stemmed from the author’s “ability to retrieve a late nineteenth century tone—a minor tone if you like, a posture of privacy and bad nerves—and have it apply to the hugeness, the atrocity, of the century following.” Geoff Dyer et al., “A Symposium on W. G. Sebald,” The Threepenny Review, no. 89 (April 1, 2002): 19.
scholars, whose intentions are to promote deeper interest in the radical works but too often lead to simplistic -isms. Maintaining awareness of differences even as one attempts to approach or understand is important in order to avoid the dangers in seeing the Other as being like One, and trying (even enforcing) it to be so.

For Deleuze and Guattari—and as Deleuze will apply to Francis Bacon’s art in *The Logic of Sensation*—“the aim of painting has always been the deterritorialization of the face.”\(^{110}\) Art serves to renew perceptual abilities by refusing to be colonized with One’s language-based ideas. To Clark’s point then about the Poussin paintings, they cannot, and ought not, be singularly defined. Doing so enacts the mechanics of facialization, which the art work resists because “an artwork of this intensity *always stands at the crossroads between very different semantic worlds*” and so cannot be superficially described.\(^{111}\) A paint stroke or a color can be interpreted differently depending on the system of interpretation applied, as Clark noticed of “the mouth as paint” and “mouth as mouth.”\(^{112}\)

On the face of it, academic research has established parameters, where the art historical work of extrapolating art is done in a particular manner, utilizing certain signs to designate the margins of the study.\(^{113}\) Clark’s refusal to participate in this game for the Poussin paintings is a dismantling of an entirely different face than the one posed by the painting. He is displacing the invisible but shimmering face of the “good” spectator who fulfills the established standard of viewing, as dictated by the canonical art historical research. As a radical scholar who introduced the study of social politics in his groundbreaking book, Clark nevertheless confronts here his

\(^{110}\) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 301.
\(^{111}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 163, his emphasis.
\(^{112}\) Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 127.
\(^{113}\) My pun at the beginning of this sentence is a reminder that the work and experience of academic research is rarely as formulaic as its judges suggest.
own established viewing practice. *Snake* makes him question the social historical interpretation of works because that well-established methodology now fixes the work.

Clark’s attention to material form in *The Sight of Death* raised questions among some reviewers. As the leading voice in the social politics of art production and the art canon, many wondered if he had embraced Clement Greenberg’s formalism, because he used “a model of aesthetics that closely resembles Greenberg’s: one that is grounded in discernment, detachment and autonomy.” In *Sight of Death*, Clark seems to be using a slow methodical consideration of the formal properties of Poussin’s paintings and painting process, an orientation that is reminiscent of, though different, from Greenberg’s rejection of art whose content considered anything other than its own materiality.

Clark’s career was built on “categorizing artists by social class and political affiliation,” by examining the social history surrounding production. Greenberg maintained “art’s

---

114 Halsall, “The Ethics of Eyesight Alone,” 8. Yve-Alain Bois sighs in an article “Whose Formalism” that he must “once again try to free ‘formalism’ from the life-insured mortgage Greenberg has been granted,” which points to the fact that Clement Greenberg is considered the ‘über-formalist’ though in fact the term stretches across several distinguished approaches. Mieke Bal et al., “Art History and Its Theories,” *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 1 (1996): 9. For the purposes of this chapter, and given Clark and Greenberg’s earlier debates, Greenberg is once more representing formalism’s configurations.

115 Greenberg’s focus on the painting as a two-dimensional surface to be appreciated in its formal and material qualities rather than its relations with the world of its production are the dividing split between Greenberg and Clark. Greenberg’s cultural theory was initially Marxist before “his ultimate settling for ‘purity’ as the only feasible artistic ideal.” T. J. Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (September 1, 1982): 143. Greenberg explains his concept of ‘purity’ in “Modernist Painting,” as the means by which each art could express what was unique to its medium, thereby producing a self-definition that excluded other arts and secured each art’s value on its own terms. Greenberg’s notorious concept of ‘flatness’ was largely developed in relation to his notion of purity in “Modernist Painting.” Rather than dissembling the flatness of the canvas, Modernism embraced it, and Abstraction reinforced that two-dimensionality, rather than permitting any remnants of three-dimensional appearances that would associate it with sculpture. Flatness thus becomes the primary feature of painting. Modernism is a “subversive” practice that “converts all theoretical possibilities into empirical ones” by focusing on the making and experiencing of art as a flat surface, though Greenberg clarifies that “the truth and success of [Modernist] work is individual before anything else” and his general pronouncements are not to be misunderstood as the individual goals of each artist and each work. Greenberg explains that art is a “continuity” from the past, without which history “Modernist art would be impossible.” All quotes taken from Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, vol. 4 (London: Paul Chapman in association with the Open University, 1988), 5—10.

separateness as a social practice.” Clark’s argument against Greenberg was a refusal to celebrate a path whereby art could embrace such a disembodied dissolution. Clark’s vehemence made him “the scourge of the more arid variants of formalism.” A heightened interest in form seemed to augur a change in Clark’s approach to art, but an important aspect of Clark’s effort in *The Sight of Death* is to undermine theoretical stagnancy. Clark’s concern with the significance of social theory in art historical reflections does not mitigate the possibility that forty years later he finds that a new politics requiring new examinations.

Theory is not an abstraction, but an attempt at a critical distance on our own social imbrication...if “theory” comes to authorize the uncritical use of selected theories, without any sense of the political, the historical, and the ideological, then we have fallen away from the tension Marx identified for himself between mental speculation and the concrete, back, as Freud suspected, into religion: orthodoxy, canonicity, idealism, fantasy.

Griselda Pollock’s injunction to avoid the trappings of theory and a theoretical approach, is at the heart of Clark’s polemic. Rather than establishing a definitive reading, Clark’s experiment in art writing counters the majority politics at work in the discipline of art history, and in its guiding theories. Where previously he wrote art histories that implied an allegorical relation to the politics of the present, *The Sight of Death* is a “politics of diatribe and denunciation.” His “injunction to look” is not simply the enthusiasm of an avid art

118 Clark aimed to “interpret and extrapolate from the texts” what Clark supposes to be Greenberg’s ultraleftist point of view. Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 141. Clark, however, refuses the “singular and perfect disembodiment” that Greenberg advocated as a means of permitting art to “substitute itself for the values capitalism has made valueless,” Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 157, 154.
120 Bal et al., “Art History and Its Theories,” 20.
appreciator. Clark calls on viewers to slow down, to see for themselves, to question why they see what they see as well as the superficial relations posited between image and idea. As one critic of *Sight of Death* noted, “buried within the apparent meandering solipsism is a subtle polemic on the importance of aesthetics in contemporary life.”

An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance[....] The culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life, and this also allows one to recognize the contradictoriness of the avant-garde undertaking it.

Clark argues that visual culture accepts all images as signs with meaning, transporting the visual back into the capital logic of consumer culture—“the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it. It represents one possibility of resistance in a world saturated by slogans, labels, sales pitches, little marketable meaning-motifs.” He avoids summing his interpretation or his experience; complexity is the politics he hopes to reestablish. Understanding the current use of images as “still utterly under the spell of the verbal” through their parallel instrumentation to “the logo, the brand name, the product slogan, the compressed pseudo-narrative of the tv commercial.” He sees images being used to deterritorialize our desires. Midway through the journal, Clark’s writing becomes a tirade against the easy relation between word and image and ideology.

---

122 Harris, “In Spite of Everything,” 20.
125 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 123. The image has been transported into an instrument of the market, “dispersed and accelerated until they become the true and sufficient commodities,” Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 185.
126 Heffernan, in a footnote to his *Museum of Words*, rejects Derrida’s supposition in *De la grammaologie* that all inscription (choreography, musical, pictorial) is writing: “without some distinction between writing and depicting, however, we cannot understand or explain how the antagonism between them drives the kind of writing called ekphrasis” (Heffernan 203).
Images can inspire critical thought. Critical thought, in the contemporary situation, is a political act, albeit a “weak politics.” A real engagement with a work of art would be a greater commitment to something of this world than the fast-moving visual culture permits. Writing in the near shadow of 9/11, in the year when war was declared, the realm of visual culture, he argues, does much to subdue the atrocities of life, of being alive. Slowing down to look requires the spectator to suffer this discomfort. That attention makes it an act of resistance, albeit not a radical one. His work has been to reveal “what images are like when they truly interfere with preconceptions, and generate new frameworks (or at least new possibilities) of understanding,” which sometimes means breaking out of the framework posited by the discourse.

If the face is a politics, dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming clandestine. Dismantling the face is the same as breaking through the wall of the signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity[....] Find your black holes and white walls, know them, know your faces; it is the only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight.

Over the course of writing in front of the two Poussins hung opposite one another, and then in the process of collecting his notes, Clark became familiar with the “black holes” of his work: “Scholarship...is always a matter of skirting round a black hole of the unknown.” Rather than “skirting” the nameless and faceless, Clark heads into unmarked territory for a “truer” research about those art works that he found deeply compelling. He knows the project is unusual but proceeds. On February 22, he notes: “I have not been thinking in general terms about the turn in my writing this whole project represents: the writing itself has hardly left room for

---

127 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 185, his emphasis.
128 ibid., 176.
129 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 188.
131 Clark’s verb choice “skirting” will become poignant.
that.”132 Deleuze identifies a minority literature as one that “begins by speaking” and then allows the expression to “shatter forms, mark new ruptures and functions.”133 The writing took Clark by surprise, but he pursues it precisely because he finds that the ruptures are presenting the opportunity to voice a problem he has not had the chance to articulate so clearly.

_The Sight of Death_’s proposition for an alternate means of engaging a work of art was a radical, minority voice that was dismissed by many irritated reviews. Nicholas Penny in the _London Review of Books_ would have preferred “a concise essay.”134 Anthony Blunt’s 1966 monograph investigated Poussin’s philosophical considerations, which have remained the dominant platform for all discourse on the artist.135 Danto wanted a summary and conclusion from Clark that would have extended the established studies on Poussin, disappointed that the experiment in writing did not deepen the reader’s “understanding of Poussin, and then of how Poussin conveyed some philosophical idea through images.”136

Clark did not aim to write a conclusive account of Poussin’s _Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake_ or _Landscape with a Calm_. That choice is not an avoidance. Writing about art should not “flinch from making sense of the mute things it is looking at...but it should invent ways for this explicitness to be overtaken again by the thing-ness, the muteness, of what it started from.”137 Clark tried to maintain his awareness of the paintings visual elements in his writing rather than have them become absorbed by assorted scholars’ writings. Disagreeing with interpretations of and positing alternatives to the scholarship presumes the images have been and

132 Clark, _The Sight of Death_, 121.
133 Ronald Bogue, _Deleuze and Guattari_ (London; New York: Routledge, 1989), 120.
137 Clark, _The Sight of Death_, 216.
can remain subsumed in the language of their description. Elizabeth Prettejohn concludes her review, in *Art History: The Journal of the Association of Art Historians*, commending Clark for introducing something significant and radical once again into the discourse around art.

Will this kind of writing effect a new paradigm shift in art history, comparable to the one heralded in Clark’s books of 1973? I hope so, if only to combat the little-mindedness of the art history that aims merely to detect the ‘tawdry ideologies’ in the art of the past. Such writing could be ‘research’ in a truer sense than the one in which we have become indoctrinated: a kind of enquiry that might find something we could never have predicted in advance.¹³⁸

**The Steps of Poetry**

If Clark's journal entries are jarring ruptures, then his decision to include poems that he wrote during those months are a Deleuzian diagram, “a chaos, a catastrophe, but also a seed of order or of rhythm” for the possibilities of writing on art.¹³⁹ When Clark suddenly writes a poem, he is surprised but intrigued; when other poems arise, he does not abandon them. In *The Brooklyn Rail* interview, he explained the poem’s presence:

The poems in the book happened abruptly: the kernels of all of them, and sometimes a version of the poem as a whole, forced themselves on me, usually in the first minutes of the day. That’s to say nothing about poetry in general, just about these poems on this occasion. And naturally I worked like mad to make them better after the first shot. Probably too hard.¹⁴⁰

---

¹³⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, translated by Daniel W. Smith, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 67. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh shares an anecdote about how terms often have different meanings for different people: “In a famous radio conversation between Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and Bruce Glaser in 1964, Stella made a rather surprising and suddenly aggressive remark. It might have been partially triggered by an earlier comment that Robert Rosenblum had made when reviewing an exhibition of Stella’s ‘Black Paintings’ in which he had referred to them as ‘diagrams.’ Stella stated: ‘A diagram is not a painting; it’s as simple as that. I can make a painting from a diagram, but can you?’” Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Painting as Diagram: Five Notes on Frank Stella’s Early Paintings, 1958—1959,” *October* (2013), 126—44.
Clark is excited when he realizes that the poems offer an approach to the literature on Poussin that does not require the scholarship to change his mind. He can read it for tidbits that might expand the investigations of his poems.

At least the [poems] on Pointel and Félibien will give me something to look for in the Poussin scholarship...If I read instrumentally, on the other hand, for the sake of the poems, then with a bit of luck the effect on my understanding of the paintings, and how I write about them, will be more indirect—less superintended.\textsuperscript{141}

The advantage of this indirect approach is that he can inform himself without requirement of the text to do so in any particular fashion. He continues to the end of that day’s entry with further reflections on this poetic practice.

This sounds as if I’m mainly interested in the poems tactically, as steps to more flexible prose; but that’s the opposite of the case. I mean to make poems, not poetical exercises; and yes, I do think a good poem about Poussin would be the highest form of criticism. Bad poems, however...And especially bad poems about paintings...What is it about the genre?...\textsuperscript{142}

Clark’s allusion to a good poem as the highest form of criticism harkens back to Baudelaire, who wrote that a sonnet or elegy might well provide the best rendition of a painting, an offering of one art for the pleasure of the other. Clark’s journal entries and poems break with formal scholarship, whose strictures exist in order, in part, to ensure clear, coherent prose. Clark is fortunate to be an excellent writer, whose experimentations are still lucid and enlightening, as would not be the case for all who might try.\textsuperscript{143} If, as Prettejohn recommends, such attempts were to become more common, readers would undoubtedly be confronted with abysmal writing that made them turn away from reading or looking. Plenty would argue, however, that much

\textsuperscript{141} Clark, \textit{The Sight of Death}, 53.
\textsuperscript{142} Clark, \textit{The Sight of Death}, 53.
\textsuperscript{143} The poems from this time were subsequently published in \textit{The London Review of Books} and \textit{The Times Literary Supplement} with surprisingly little alternation, which indicates and reinforces Clark’s confidence and eloquence as a writer.
academic writing is as dry and dull as bad poetry is embarrassing. The four poems Clark produced during his time at the Getty are incorporated into Sight of Death on the date “of the poem’s first viable draft.”

The poems are not simply another formal experiment but strike at the crux of his concerns. Prettejohn makes the astute remark that the book reaches “what might be called its intellectual climax, the point at which the closest looking coalesces with the grandest political and ethical claims of the entire project, on 22 February 2000, at pages 121-3, exactly halfway through the book.” Every day between February 15 to the 25th, Clark writes extensively—more than at any other time. Though he attends to his journal entries regularly, this continuous ten-day span of daily return is unusual. The entry of February 22 claims that “I have not been thinking in general terms about the turn in my writing this whole project represents” before he proceeds through the rant that Prettejohn identifies as the core of his intellectual argument in The Sight of Death. The “turn” may equally be a response to his memory and the February 21st poem, both of which require the political response of his entry on the 22nd. The climax that she identifies may not be the final statement, but the entire episode of memory, poem, political upset. The “turn” in his writing is both the stylistic development, in the journal and a poem, but also the content that appears through his investigations. The “intellectual climax” is the fusion and interaction of all three.

On the 20th, two days before the climax identified by Prettejohn, Clark chooses “to take stock” of the work to date. Here, he begins the reflections that will be so virulent on the 22nd.

---

144 Clark, The Sight of Death, 40.
146 Clark, The Sight of Death, 121.
147 Clark, The Sight of Death, 114.
He begins with an anecdote from 1960, when he and a friend stood on the edge of a demonstration in front of London’s National Gallery of Art and selected “which picture in particular had to go the way of all flesh; and obviously it had to be the picture we would most miss” and chose *Snake.* Clark considers his “long-ago iconoclasm” and questions his youthful certainty that images should never exist on a pedestal, removed from society, separate from political action; Clark’s earlier career arguments insisted that images participated in the political sphere, and must not be used to deflect the necessary change in the institutions that cultivate and support the works of art: “images—representations—standing in the way of action, and continually rendering the intolerable tolerable.” Siri Hustvedt, writing about Richter, comments that in the West, iconoclasm lives on “not in its old haunts—religion or politics—but in modern art.” Clark too arrives at that conclusion, which makes him reconsider his earlier philosophy—“the tactic of actual image destruction in the face of such a circumstance now seems to me worse than futile.” Religion and Politics are no longer revolutionary as they once were, as he once believed them to be.

Returning on the 21st, Clark writes a poem entitled “On the Steps of the National Gallery.” The poem opens “I am on my way to destroy Poussin’s *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake.*” The first line is a complete sentence, an aggressive statement of violence that continues in the next line, “I know what I am up to believe me.” He is a student of art history whose knowledge will define the work of art and thus, in Clark’s current viewpoint, destroy it. Also, however, he is standing at the edge of a political protest, which would lead him to rampage

---

the gallery if he chooses to join with their social vision. The vandalism explicit in the first sentence and the arrogance in the curt line that follows establish the scope and tension of the narrator's experience standing on the steps of London's National Gallery.

His physical location is also significant because of the perspective it announces in his placement between the hallowed halls of art and the political square on which it is situated. The National Gallery is centrally located on Trafalgar Square, which honors the 1805 battle when the English empire was victorious over Napoleon, where the statue of Admiral Nelson juts skyward, a square where political demonstrations are held, though the area is owned by the Queen in Right of the Crown, one of the many titles for Queen Elizabeth II, whose private home Buckingham Palace is only slightly off to the right of the National Gallery steps. The angry narrator is standing on the edge between the venerable art and the vulnerable rabble. No more will a gracious queen “sign and soothe” the mob, who are “choking and spluttering,” caught by the snake “tightening at our throats.” John Berger identified the aristocratic heritage of oil paintings in his BBC show and 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*. The works in the museum are symbols for the system that the people wish to overthrow. Destroying the pictures, commissioned by the nobility of a centuries-long hierarchy, leaves “a space” for new ways of seeing. Now, “everything will be visible for ever” and at long last, “the rumble of the excluded at the chained front gate” will be witnessed, expresses the narrator caught between image and action.152

---

152 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 121. Clark’s attention shift from the painting to the rabble is reminiscent of Diderot’s own strange digression on the painting in his *Salon* of 1767: “Don’t the residents of the countryside, as they go about their work, have...their own scourges: the hail that destroys their crops and leaves them desolate, the taxes that compel them to move and sell their tools, the *corvée* to which both they and their livestock are subject, the poverty, and the law that lands them in prison?” As quoted in Walter E. Rex, “The Landscape Demythologized: From Poussin’s Serpents to Fénelon’s ‘Shades,’ and Diderot’s Ghost,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 4 (1997), 419. Rex notes that nothing in Poussin’s scene calls for social interpretation, and is “this gratuitous mentioning of social abuses is the part of the account in which Diderot himself is most present and engaged..., as the whole encyclopedic project attests, the kind of social preoccupation reflected in this passage is entirely typical of Diderot,” 416.
The situational conflict of the poem, the tensions Clark is grappling with in his aesthetic philosophy, are left unresolved in the poem’s first published version. The London Review of Books publication in January of 2004 ends with the mob “straining (and failing) to catch the rabble rouser’s last words.” The mob strains towards the leader but cannot be roused to accomplish the stated directives. The mob cannot be guided by the excited leader and so what direction they will take remains undetermined. The version of the poem from his journal of February 21, 2000 ends after an additional stanza, which is separated from what came before by a star and noticeably different in the form of far shorter lines.

Down through the centuries comes the sound of a broom
Sweeping colors into a corner,
And a note in a Puritan’s daybook:
“Ladders, poles, clippers for lead,
God’s work in the long afternoon yesterday—
How we rattled down proud Becket’s glassy bones!”
Rain drifts exultantly through empty lights.
The iconoclast turns to his loom.153

In the space after the last scene, the mob has destroyed the art. All color has been swept into a corner, and a puritanical stringency to focus on this mortal coil has eliminated the complexities of existence revealed in art. This section refers to Thomas Becket’s change of heart as a way of addressing an appreciation for the aesthetic. When Becket became the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, his allegiance to King Henry II shifted in order to recover some of the strength of the Catholic church ruled by the Pope in Rome. Becket’s arguments with the King’s political leadership led four knights to assassinate Becket, in the belief that they were acting on the King’s orders. After his death, he became a martyr, with his bones as relics at his tomb, a symbol of the Church’s piety in the face of royal government treachery. The Trinity Church

153 Clark, The Sight of Death, 121.
stained glass “Becket Window” from 1320 is a famous site for religious and artistic pilgrims to Canterbury Cathedral.

The tale is complicated further by King Henry VIII’s decision, centuries later, that all good Protestants destroy graven images of God, and icons and relics of saints and martyrs offered by the Catholic Church and deemed by the Reformation as false mediators to the direct relationship with God that each person can have. Many stained-glass windows of the martyr Becket were shattered and his skeleton disappeared. The sacred space has been emptied of its value. The building is abandoned, the hallowed halls are desolate, and the walls crumble as the “rain drifts exultantly through the empty lights.” The iconoclast, responsible for this desolation, turns to his loom, perhaps to weave the hair shirts that Becket wore as an ascetic acknowledgment of his penance.154 On the other hand, contemporary use of the word “iconoclast” also suggests that some outstanding person is present, beginning the task of weaving new tapestries and tales. Out of the abject desolation, Fate spins another life.

Both versions of the poem conclude without resolution. Clark’s mature uncertainty reflects back on the young man who insisted that “dawn must not be our metaphor,” and wanted “daylight in the face” with no confusing “stream winding out of sight,” preferring “everything visible for ever.”155 Once upon a time, the absolute belief that the constraints of economic discrepancy, the politics of inequality could make the image perfectly clear, that images would

154 Given current positive spins on the word, the *Oxford English Dictionary* usefully reminds us that the term “iconoclast” means: 1. “A breaker or destroyer of images” as argued some Church groups in the 8th and 9th centuries and was then applied to Protestants during the Reformation; 2. “One who assails or attacks cherished beliefs or venerated institutions on the ground that they are erroneous or pernicious.” This is the sense by which I believe Clark means the term rather than the way the Sundance Channel’s show Iconoclasts redefines the term in its descriptive statement that it offers “a series of intimate, unpredictable portraits of creative visionaries whose passion for what they do has transformed our culture.”

no longer hide false ideologies supported his unwillingness to accept that certain aspects of the work might remain impossible to articulate. Earlier, he believed that “Dawn must not be our metaphor” because the people must not wait in suspense for what the day will bring; hope is a way of dismissing action. But, continuous action has made everything political and nothing has the subtlety that demands restraint, respect, and reinterpretation. Politics subsumed art, and he sees how that has allowed art to collapse into life. The poem makes Clark turn back to the launch of the disintegration he now finds. The two versions of the poem, however, indicate an uncertainty about whether we stand on the edge of imminent devastation or must begin again out of a completely new cloth.

The social politics of his youth generated a following that minimizes the concerted effort of the painter’s work with a paintbrush in favor of the political context of the work’s production. This choice to ignore the individual effort made images symbolic of political and social constructs, including the economic class that art represents. Clark’s second of the four poems, “Pointel to Posterity,” is about Poussin’s leading patron and that man’s passion for Poussin’s paintings.156 “Pointel to Posterity” was written two weeks prior to the “On Standing on the Steps of the National Gallery,” but it introduces the tensions among fiscal value, individual appreciation, and cultural legacy that are expanded upon in the later poem. Here, Clark is clearer that the politics and economics of production are not sufficient to understanding the myriad experiences of sitting with art.

Pointel was an important financier in the 17th Century, but died bankrupt. His home, however, was still filled with the paintings that he had purchased and commissioned, never

---

156 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 120
selling them to pay off his debts. The poem opens by suggesting that “talk about painting and banking” would require the narrative speaker, who is Pointel, to “cook up a connection” because “These pictures have nothing to do with money.” Pointel who commissioned works from Poussin, and is thus an example of the art economy that Clark so helpfully revealed in his scholarship, is being used here to disclaim that relationship. These paintings are not produced out of and for monetary gain. On neither side of this poem written on February 12, 2000 does Clark consider the political economy of art. Clark ends the poem then by having Pointel address why he kept Poussin’s paintings:

I did not hide these canvases from my creditors
Exactly for solace, you understand, or instruction, or out of habit
Or even pride. Some of the above, granted,
But mainly to keep at bay the odd emptiness I find overtakes me
As the coin rings true, the contract is finalized,
Confession done with, and the great day
Offers its promise of things outward—a fresh killing,
Tide tables, the play of light on a column—and in the evening,
In front of my Solomon, the settlement of accounts.¹⁵⁸

Art is not there as solace, nor as moral instruction. It is not appreciated simply from long training, nor out of cultural vanity. These all apply and are often relevant, but an ongoing appreciation for art has to do with a different kind of relationship. In a life that is a daily summing of costs and returns, that recognizes how everything must be evaluated, an “odd emptiness” is present. The exchange rate of our lives is exhausting. Art is not a balm to cover over the wound struck by this reality. Instead, art “is doing its level best to keep things in balance” as Clark says a couple days later.¹⁵⁹ Our lives may be determined by the tax man’s summing up, but if we are merely a set of numbers that must square away, then life is determined

¹⁵⁷ Clark, The Sight of Death, 85.
¹⁵⁸ Clark, The Sight of Death, 86.
¹⁵⁹ Clark, The Sight of Death, 92.
and has none of the possibilities that a dangling proposition, and all the things that remain unsaid, leaves us with.

The February 22nd entry concludes “Dawn is breaking in *Snake,*” embracing the metaphor Clark once rejected. The painting’s logic, in his opinion, requires that first breaking of the light, even though he understands his youthful sentiment, “the young revolutionary’s wanting to be in ordinary darkness still, crushing the life out of his enemy.” The revolutionary wants to destroy his enemy, an act of darkness. Once the revolutionary’s day has risen and the light has spread, the revolutionary has no purpose; his identity as such will die. The irony of Clark’s newfound appreciation for dawn is his recognition that light imposes its own limitations; it concludes the need for revolution and change. Noon sun streams into every shadow, shape shifting with each hour. An enlightened realm, however, can forget that all has not been, and never can be, revealed. The flip side of the revolutionary’s darkness is his conviction that his philosophy is an absolute enlightenment. Streaming light dissolves the ambiguities of shadows, just as darkness annihilates.

In his last poem of March 3, 2000, Clark plays with shadows and their nebulous ability to reveal, halting the negation that is the absolute dark or total light.

*Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*

‘Presentiment—is the long Shadow—on the Lawn’

Actual encounter, says Poussin
(Replying to Dickinson’s shadow)
Is the hardness of light coming over the hill
Drawing the curtain on last night’s horrors.161

---

The light reveals and, in so doing, removes the dark and shadowy elements of night. The man killed by a snake occurs in the shadows, and the light of day does not diminish that fact, simply pretends it cannot happen. One’s sense of things happens in the shadowy spaces of thought and disappear under the hard light of reason. Dawn is a time of discovery, a metaphor entirely suited to Clark’s present experimentation. The transformation of darkness into shadows, for Clark, presents a realm where spectators of art, the cultural realm, and the political world are active in the process of discovery.

The poems introduce shifting concepts long before Clark discusses them forthrightly. The poems could have been removed from the specified project, which is to write his daily experiences viewing the painting, but he chose to have the presentation be all-inclusive. Poetry is another means of considering some of what he is attempting to see, particularly since he says that Poussin’s method of intention and inspiration are not dissimilar to the work of poetry.

The paradox is that in such an elaborated, intellectual practice of painting as his so many of the key effects and decisions are pure inspiration. That doesn’t mean they were not thought out, and in a sense carefully plotted; but in the sense that poets plots prosody or diction or the particular force of a rhyme. Poussin's elaborate design includes brushstrokes that are “pure inspiration,” just like a poet’s practice. Clark noticed on the first day that “the placing of the foreground goatherd’s hair exactly at the intersection of shoreline and hummock” make that application of paint become both the man’s hair and the edge of the water. Poetic language can aim at a similar liminal pass, where the insights, confusions, thoughts, revelations, feelings and imaginings that occur in response to

---

162 Clark seems to be introducing a Platonic or Heideggerian notion here of truth as unconcealment, but not one that conceals concealment.
164 ibid., 15.
the visual object occur without being stated in a declaration claiming to sum the whole. Such a change in his usual approach permits him to see differently, and thus to offer something new.

Poetry is textured by the words that compose it, producing meaning both through the line-up of words and phrases, and through breaks and double-meaning. Indeterminacy can be a part of poetic meaning, where the same is a failure of sense in prose essays.

There is a kind of dialectic unsettling because line-endings and verse divisions work into and against semantic overload in contest with the precursors to unresolved meaning...thought in this matrix is not unitary (unlike ideas), but is self-disputing and intrinsically dialectical.\textsuperscript{165}

Engaging the form is not a rejection but an affirmation of multiple meanings. The indeterminacy refused by scholarship is available in poetry, similar to the disturbance that Clark finds in painting, “these uncontrollable materialities always coming into contact with the understanding and maybe substantiating it, maybe putting it into doubt.”\textsuperscript{166}

Clark’s regular returns to the Poussins is not perceived as being a process of introspection or therapy. He finds the notion vulgar, an attitude expressed in his criticism, journal entries, and the first poem he writes:

I do not believe that aromas, even of ash, can be therapy
Any more than the bust in the innermost room of the castle, onyx, émail—
Waiting for the dark ages, offering them its Roman nose.
Art is not a set of survival skills.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{165} J.H. Prynne, “Poetic Thought,”\textit{ Textual Practice} 24, no. 4 (August 1, 2010): 599.
\textsuperscript{166} Clark,\textit{ The Sight of Death}, 85. He is cautious of his, and all writers, efforts to explain the “material appearances of paint” and what those signify (36). The linear narrative of prose is binding, while any writing’s effort to try to dive to the heart of things is awkward: “(and depths in writing are so often specious, titillating: it is exactly one of painting’s strengths that it can plumb them without parading them)” (115). Painting does not need to labor at this sort of exactitude. Language, in his parentheses, shows its desire to do so, as in these two examples: “The bagpipe player clutches (squeezes, cradles) the sewn hide of a sheep” (47) and “[t]he citadel in Calm basks imperturbably (unemphatically) in the sun” (23). The parenthetical words suggest alternatives to the first word provided, to shift or expand the meaning Clark is reaching to express.
\textsuperscript{167} Clark,\textit{ The Sight of Death}, 40; T. J. Clark, “Landscape with a Calm (From a Painting by Poussin),”\textit{ The Threepenny Review}, no. 92 (January 1, 2003): 33.
Clark is certain his interest rests inside the picture frame—at the beginning. Prolonged viewing, however, complicates any fixed notion, just as a poem about one things becomes about something else over many readings.

A PERSONAL INSIGHT

Clark enjoys his time with the Poussins, but *Snake* returns to London and after a few more months at the Getty so does Clark. Life interrupts his investigation. He never “fully picked up the threads” of his initial responses because “Real life, as I say, stepped in. I sorted slides and answered e-mail. Painting, in its singularity, was eclipsed.”¹⁶⁸ He quotes Wittgenstein—“a picture held us captive”¹⁶⁹—to explain why he returned, a year later in March 2001, to *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. Despite his rejection of art as therapy, his notes, which haphazardly occur through September 21, 2003, lead him to a significant personal revelation that cannot be rejected, whose presence requires self-reflection.

The washerwoman becomes an intense focus for him as he tries to understand how effectively the paint can reveal human suffering. He finds her “expression,’ the nature of her attention to someone else, to some ill will of the world impinging on her” is the “intensest example I know of painting having humanity come out of nothing but a pattern of touches, of gradations.”¹⁷⁰ Her intensity leads to an involuntary “utterly familiar, utterly unsurprising” association. Deleuze’s mention of “white walls” is appropriate here as similar to the blank canvas of the artist that is not to be understood as a “tabula rasa,” but rather a space of unconscious

---

¹⁶⁸ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 201.
¹⁶⁹ “A picture held us captive and we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it inexorably” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* # 2).
¹⁷⁰ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 140, his emphasis.
preconceptions and received conventions that the artist, here writer, struggles against in the creative endeavor. The personal must be acknowledged for the way it territorializes the painting, subsuming it into the self. Then, one is no longer trying to see the painting but accepting the self-absorbed version. Ignoring one’s personal associations, however, does not mean they are not occurring, and it is Clark’s willingness to confront his own projections and recognize the influence they can have.

Those infinitely caring and protective arms and hands, of the woman reaching out to the man’s vulnerability are also (one of them) raised to strike: they are my mother’s hands, that is terrifying and endlessly gentle. And then...it turns out that the woman’s expression is also my mother’s, recalled from a specific occasion.\(^\text{171}\)

The psychic material reveals his own “reading” of the man’s gesture and the woman’s response: “the running man reaches out across a distance that will never be bridged, or even crossed by a comprehensible signal” because the “terror and gentleness and solicitude” of his mother meant her children never knew what they would find, or how they might be received.\(^\text{172}\) This fundamental relationship is implicit in his appreciation of the “terror and solicitude there on the painting’s surface, firmly and plainly part of its plot.”\(^\text{173}\) When he ends the section with the statement “How infinitely chaste and matronly are the woman’s neckline and cap!” he equally admits that it is a “classic reaction formation” meant to minimize the harmful effects of his description of his mother, after all “it gave no hint of the courage with which she fought her own unhappiness.”\(^\text{174}\) The art historian Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf might have been thinking of

\(^\text{172}\) ibid., 202.
\(^\text{173}\) ibid., 203.
\(^\text{174}\) ibid., 204.
Clark when she wrote that “the art historian draws on recognition of facial and bodily expressions as well as on her or his own learning...life experience weighs heavily.”

Freud identified a theological and narcissistic tendency in art scholars who “have chosen their hero as the subject of their studies because—for reason of their personal emotional life—they have felt a special affection for him from the very first.” Clark admits a basic desire to “exit from my own world of responses into another,” based in his “very first world of responses” where his mother's presumed depression led him to find alternate realities. His childhood propagated the drive to seek out other experiences. In reflecting on his reaction, Clark realizes that he sought art precisely “to enter the picture’s world” rather than bring the picture into his world. Clark’s coming-to-terms with the variety of personal revelations brought forth by his continued return to his favorite painting disturbs him sufficiently that he takes time away from the project. He returns to it, however, because “the answers that we find are conditioned by our own circumstances and does not destroy their value” as Helen Gardner says in The Business of Criticism.

I should go on looking and finding out—not, then, nervously suppressing the psychoanalytic melodrama for fear of its coming to be what the painting is “of,” but admitting it, having it be there completely on the surface, and seeing if the surface begins to wear it out or shrug it off.

Rather than suppressing his fear, Clark confronts what the fear alerts: the possibility of altering his system of beliefs about art.

---

176 Freud, Leonardo, 80.
177 Clark, The Sight of Death, 222.
178 ibid., 222.
179 Helen Gardner, Business of Criticism (Oxford University Press, 1959), 51.
180 Clark, The Sight of Death, 221.
With great discomfort, he returns to the material of the free association a month later, still worried that his personal insight will alter how he sees the painting. These passages on the painting respond to a reproduction he keeps on his desk. Visiting the painting at the National Gallery of Art, where it is again on display, Clark finds all the complexity once more. The scale and perspective of the painting establishes a distance that does not permit overt personalization. The personal association occurs through looking at a reproduction, “in miniature that inevitably pushed and slightly overheated the color,” where the real painting “is grander and cooler...does not invite identification.” Only when the painting is disembodied through the mechanics of reproduction to offer a surface level resemblance does Clark project upon and consume the work of art. Only when the situation is private—his desk with solitude to free associate—can the psychological become evident. Clark’s associations are relevant to him, but not to the painting. When he writes on June 27th, he determines that the associations are separate, because they do not surface as a level of meaning or give the action to which they are tied another dimension.

Arthur Danto was “disappointed and disillusioned” by these personal associations, which he interprets as the conclusion to Clark’s study because they are found at the end of the book. Danto wants a focus on the works of art in order to show their humanity, while Clark finds that humanity expressed through his ongoing investigation of the pictures, including therefore not only disappointing moments, but the awkward associations as well. He recognizes that the confession may appear “tawdry and theatrical,” but the realization happened “fast enough and embarrassingly enough to be trusted.”

---


associations have not warped it melodramatically; “they have coexisted, quite soberly, with
Snake’s lucidity and restraint.”185 Personal associations do appear strongly for viewers, and
learning to manage that is relevant to engaging a work.

The heightened personal elements should not be refused but examined just as any other
reaction. Looking at it again allows the painting to continue, in its plurality, not to be solely
contained by his personal reading: “Paintings are defenceless, paintings are survivors.”186 As
Lagerlöf writes, “the work is not exhausted by the thoughts—neither by the artist’s beliefs nor by
the interpreter’s.”187 Clark's revelation acknowledges the very common personalization that
occurs. His resistance to accepting his psychological facet as determining the painting allows
readers to reflect on their own attachments, or fears, and observe that paintings can continue to
offer material for contemplation alongside the personal.

In fact, extended engagement with a work of art will require considering the work, the
artist, those times, these times, but also oneself. The social, economic, political, and
psychological factors under which a work is created are significant, but not to the detriment of
also looking carefully at the work and yourself. The first poem Clark writes is about rejecting art
as therapy. Clark’s conviction that art should not be reduced to psychological exploration
remains true because Clark is adamant that art should not be reduced to any single way of seeing.

Something in me flinches from the glamor of always probing deeper as a looker,
piercing the veil, staking emotional ownership of the image. One part of me goes
to paintings precisely for their self-sufficiency, their removal from the world of
wishes.188

188 Clark, The Sight of Death, 5.
Subjectivity can block access to the work, but it can also be the source of an enthusiastic commitment to reflection, generating more careful scrutiny of what might otherwise be only superficially perceived. Clark argues in his essay “Clement Greenberg’s Theory” that “art wants to address someone, it wants something precise and extended to do; it wants resistance, it needs criteria,” which can only occur if each spectator is willing to risk viewing on her own terms.\textsuperscript{189} Such an effort undermines the culture’s dominant values and introduces difference. As he showed in his groundbreaking work, \textit{Image of the People}, a detailed study of any period, artist or event needs “a multiplicity of perspectives.”\textsuperscript{190} His approach in \textit{Sight of Death} may appear as an unequivocal renunciation of such a pluralist investigation, but in presenting his own exploratory work in relation to a single work of art, he reveals the many perspectives a single viewer can discover and explore in repeated viewing. By showing the practice of his investigation, but holding back his own questions or hypotheses, Clark confronts the reader with her desire to know what he saw. Since he offers no answers, the reader must pursue her own query.

Bergson claimed that “true freedom lies in the power to decide, to constitute problems themselves.”\textsuperscript{191} The creation of a question stems from the questioner’s willful inventiveness, and creation is thus connected to freedom. To pose a question is an affirmative act because it is inventive. The education system teaches students how to solve problems posed by authority figures, thereby instituting acceptance of the controls posited as a part of the question. Questions establish the boundaries of their possible answers and thus limit the types of answers or solutions accepted. Clark does not wholeheartedly endorse a solution that other scholars posit, and so

\textsuperscript{189} Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 155.
\textsuperscript{190} Clark, \textit{Image of the People}, 257. The image informs the production of ideas and ideologies just as much as the other way for “we are confronted with prejudice which clearly believes itself to be description: before our eyes depiction changes into ideology,” 255.
seeks to develop another question whose answer will resonate with his experience. Clark’s questioning, even before it gets articulated, is a free act.

Kant established the autonomy of the subject as the basis for the freedom of the ‘I’ in its reasoning and moral capacity. Kant’s essay “What is Enlightenment?” addresses the importance of the individual’s ability to think independently: “if I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has conscience for me...I need not trouble myself. I need not think...others will readily undertake the irksome work for me.” Enlightenment is the courage to use our reason without the direction of another, even another whose authority seems to grant them the greater knowledge to do so (such as a scholar or priest). The subject’s autonomy is based in dismissing relationship (and therefore potential influence by another) by positing the strength of the individual’s singular intellectual presence. Enlightenment is thus pinned to the subject’s autonomy. But, autonomy disassociates itself from interaction and posits an external objective eye. Clark struggles across The Sight of Death to remain in relationship with the paintings, but without allowing any specific relationship path to dominate the totality of the experience.

Jonathan Harris writes in a sympathetic review of Sight of Death that “procedures of looking and understanding are bound up together, rather than being autonomous and consecutive acts of intuition and rationalization.” Clark struggles to find an apt word, to address the inadequacy of words for the visual experience, not to overcome the problems of “looking and understanding,” but to present the challenge of using language. A work of art remains heterogeneous to the verbal descriptions used for life, but that is all the more reason for

---

192 As quoted in Porter, Deleuze and Guattari, 46.
193 Harris, “In Spite of Everything,” 26. Harris is writing in The Threepenny Review, which is a literary journal and so more open to the alternative and introspective work of Clark’s engagement, than those whose concerns are focused on art history and theory.
struggling to communicate. Fear of difference, of difficulty, of personal depths, and final death will diminish what you can see, what you can say when you do see.

COMING-TO-TERMS: A CONCLUSION

The advantage of the journal is its private space for assorted musings, a dialogue first with himself and eventually with his future reader.\textsuperscript{194} While sharing a gallery bench in front of \textit{Snake} with a school child, he incorporates the mutterings of the twelve-year-old boy, who is “struggling with his class questionnaire: ‘Write down what is happening in this picture?...’ And replies, a second later: ‘Nothing is happening in this picture!’ I know what he means.”\textsuperscript{195} Clark recognizes the frustration of an initial encounter with a work of art and the effort of moving past the sense that “nothing is happening,” though that material stillness is also the basis for painting’s appeal to him. Writing, describing, and narrating develop a sense of the picture, and Clark wants to retain the innocent eye that can also get frustrated, but also suddenly see something previously hidden.

Not exactly no longer a world—that is, no longer a play of concealment and unconcealment—but it is a world whose being a world has become invisible to it. One might equally say it is a world whose visibility is taken as devoid of shadow, having no invisibility in it...that we now have or imagine ourselves to have a world in which nothing is hidden, does not mean the world itself is not in hiding.\textsuperscript{196}

Formulaic statements or ideologic interpretations of art dictate how the art should be seen. Diderot’s adamantly rules for writing about art remain touchstones for contemporary art

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Clark’s writings often acknowledge the reader, but the journal entries include such a personal dimension that he becomes even more aware of his reader’s future presence. For example, he cringes at his own desire to tell an anecdote from his past, though it will become the source of a poem he shares.
\item Clark, \textit{The Sight of Death}, 135.
\item Margaret Iversen and Stephen W. Melville, \textit{Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures} (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 180.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
writers but are programmatic and miss other elements that may be important to modern and future works. Michael Fried writes that “Diderot’s conception of painting rested ultimately upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas.”

Diderot’s salon essays were written for those who would never see the picture and so meant to be extensive visual descriptions that negated the writer so that the readers could position themselves in the writer’s place. This restricts the individual viewer’s possible point of view, limiting it to what has been described, rather than offering her the freedom to see for herself.

Like Diderot’s eventual dissatisfaction with academic painting, Clark is wary of programmatic art writing that beats a socio-political drum. Art-historical writings aiming to fix such interpretations offer nothing new.

As if it mattered any longer—as if it had any present political point—to prove for the umpteenth time that what we poor suckers had imagined was a difficult and double-edged picture of the human condition was really, hey presto!, just another instrument of ruling class oppression.

Such approaches are no longer radical, offer no innovative insight into the work or the work’s practice, and have become irrelevant considerations. Clark’s journal with all its personal associations presents a sustained experience with a work of art that seeks to find something beyond the pre-packaged, condoned interpretation. An honest vision can be expressed in

---


198 Diderot declares his distaste for the Academy and schools in “Essais sur la peinture,” where he lambasts the institutions and the artists who permit an indoctrination that kills all inspiration. He sees artists being produced who can only imitate what their professors presented in anatomy lessons, reproduce figure drawing class poses, and repeat the highlights of past painters (174-5). He encourages artists to walk in the streets, observe the world, “toute attitude est fausse et petite; toute action est belle est vrai” (175). Diderot’s Salons become increasingly “sarcastic and lapidary” in their derision of the Academy, as Régis Michel shows in his excellent essay “Diderot and Modernity,” p.37.

199 Tuma, “T.J. Clark in Conversation with Kathryn Tuma.”
perfunctory prose or poetry, in a polemic or personal appeal. Sincerity at this level will find something akin to Poussin’s realism, “a freedom and accuracy—a way of reopening the world to imaginative scrutiny.”

Dyke comments in *Oxford Art Journal* that Clark “is his own best example of an author who changes the way we look at a given picture via her or his exquisite immanent analysis.” Clark offers an example, through his journal entries, of how images are a varied and variously difficult means of engaging the world. He analyzes the form of the picture, his situation, his writing and himself. His eye, his memory, his poetry, his daily thoughts and hesitations all come together to express his personal and political vision because, the personal is political, as Carol Hanish styled it in 1960. Life is their intertwining and neither should become the snake strangling the other. Concluding, Clark offers one final remark on his argument: “it is possible (or desirable) these days for viewer to enter into that coming-to-terms and to share it.”

The kind of slow and concentrated looking, broad and sustained reflection, informal conversation among friends, and autobiographical introspection performed by Clark offers itself as an alternative to the incessant multi-tasking, distracted communication and consumption that prevail today.

Dyke finds in Clark’s account the possibility that going to the museum can be the provocative “détournement” and “a kind of twenty-first century flânerie.” The space opens up an opportunity to reflect. Works of art can transform what we think by altering how, as well as what, we see in the world, much as the poems can radically alter how we discuss what we see in the paintings. Neither painting nor poem can change the world, but both can change how we think about it and how we think about what we’re doing about it.

201 Dyke, “Modernist Poussin,” 290.
“Prove you exist, then.”
“What do you mean, prove? Of course I exist. I’ve got a first class business in real 
estate; a wife and a couple of kids in Miami. I flew here this morning on Delta. 
I’m drinking this Scotch, aren’t I?” The voice contained a hint of tears. 
“Poor fellow,” Dr. Hasselbacher said, “you deserve a more imaginative creator 
than I have been. Why didn’t I do better for you than Miami and real estate? 
Something of imagination. A name to be remembered.”

-Graham Greene, Our Man in Havana

IMAGINING ART WRITING

Looking at art doesn’t only involve pointing the eye earnestly and extensively at an art 
object for personal or political investigation. A glance in a new direction might offer an exciting 
fireworks display compared to the steady light of disciplinary tactics. Logic is rigorous and 
reason depends on discipline, but the imagination resists such constraints. Art writing does not 
need to conform only to reasonable measures, and can express something beyond the “1) 
political; 2) symbolic; 3) theatrical; 4) shocking; 5) thrilling; 6) sentimental; 7) documentational; 
8) unambiguous,” to quote from a narrator in Julian Barnes’ History of the World in 10 1/2 
Chapters.204 The imagination offers a whole new way of seeing.

The award-winning prose poet and United States Poet Laureate Charles Simic wrote a 
book on the American artist Joseph Cornell that defies its label as an art book. In a series of brief 
texts that verge on, and perhaps are examples of, prose poetry, Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of  

Joseph Cornell straddles art history and fiction by ensuring that each fact is given narrative depth and that each fiction is associated with Joseph Cornell, and by making intellectual wandering and association key to understanding the artist’s practice. Nancy Campbell in the Times Literary Supplement called Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell “one of the best introductions to the reluctant surrealist,” explaining that “the core of Simic’s study are eight shadow boxes.” Though she goes on to explain that Simic’s “literary technique results in exuberant juxtapositions” and “oblique interpretations,” the work would likely surprise a newcomer to Cornell. The first text in “Simic’s study” reads:

Traveler in a Strange Land

A white pigeon pecking on the marble steps of the library watched over by two stone lions. It’s like a dream, I thought.

Next, I saw it on the table of the storefront fortuneteller pecking the eyes of the king of hearts.

Next, it perched on the shoulder of a black man riding a bicycle at daybreak down Sixth Avenue.

Readers may be bewildered by this text if they have not read the Preface, which explains the manner Simic will follow. Dime Store Alchemy does not provide a typical biography of Joseph Cornell, nor does he footnote scholarly research. Upon arriving at the main body, the reader still will not find art-historical description of Cornell’s boxes, such as Diderot might have provided in his Salons, as a reader might expect from a book subtitled “The Art of Joseph Cornell.” Instead, Simic’s texts are an imaginative illustration of experiencing Cornell’s work. Everything in the text is inspired by Cornell, with each detail carefully culled from Simic’s research about and admiration for the artist. Nancy Campbell’s enthusiastic review of Simic’s

work on Cornell—“a touchstone for art writing and a virtuosic work of ekphrasis”—recognizes an entirely new interpretation of what art writing can be. Simic’s text is a revelation of how interpretation can leap into the great beyond and yet be tethered to the artist and the works, bringing readers to wonder at what beauty must lie in the works discussed that an author would go to such great lengths.

Simic undermines grammar and logic within the first few pages of the book, as he introduces basic facts about the project and Cornell’s life. Analyzing the importance of the imagination in this work requires entering the labyrinth relations among the brief texts. The close readings largely focus on the first third of the book, to reveal that Simic has not yet entered the ekphrastic enterprise to write about one of Cornell’s boxes. When he does, the role of interpretation even in a descriptive passage becomes evident. The writer’s influence upon the reader’s vision of an object or scene was a staple of Classical rhetoric schools, and made ekphrasis an important tool for the public speaker. Its success depended on the speaker’s ability to connect with the audience, which introduces the complicated demands upon art writing communities to maintain their established method of speech. Simic’s imaginative rendition of Cornell’s boxes and life violate those restrictions and question their necessity. Across Dime Store Alchemy, Simic presents the reader with the role the imagination can play in seeing art.

THE STRANGE LAND OF THE IMAGINATION

Dime Store Alchemy is divided into three sections, I. Medici Slot Machine, II. The Little Box, and III. Imaginary Hotels, but the first section particularly emphasizes the activity of the

---

imagination. Interpretation is influenced by the narrative rhetoric of the art writer’s argument, “subtracting the rhetoric from an artwriter’s text is as impossible as subtracting the style from a novel.” Simic’s Preface explains how readers should consider Joseph Cornell’s work: “when it comes to his art, our eyes and imagination are the best guides.” Simic then exemplifies the type of transformation that he will work across the texts by distorting the reader’s construct of time in the Preface and the sense of space in the first text, “Traveller in a Strange World.” Time and space are the basis by which the human mind can conceive the world, as Kant argued in Critique of Pure Reason. Simic’s distortions of space and time, in the first few texts of the book, require readers to adjust the perspectives they bring. Reason has been removed as the means or end of understanding, allowing the imagination to leap into the fray. Simic moves his readers from ordered syntax of a reasonable world into the exquisite allowances of Cornell’s boxes.

In the second to last sentence of the Preface, Simic write a complex sentence where the simple past is followed by a future progressive (sometimes termed continuous). Grammatically, the second verb ought to be a future conditional, which is why the sentence sounds strange.

[Cornell] shuffled a few inconsequential found objects inside his boxes until together they composed an image that pleased him with no clue as to what that image will turn out to be in the end. I had hoped to do the same.

The past tense allows the reader to picture Cornell shuffling objects from one place to the next in this box or that box, waiting for the composition to coalesce. Switching the verb tense to the future progressive at the end of the sentence—“will turn out to be”—thrusts the reader into Cornell’s point of view, since a progressive form indicates an ongoing action. In this instance,

---

209 Simic, Dime-Store Alchemy, ix.
210 ibid., x, my emphasis.
Cornell is the only one who could be engaged in the process of determining what image will please him. To maintain parallel action, either the first verbs need to be present indicative, or the second verb should be future conditional. This grammatical disjuncture on Simic’s part is akin to Cornell’s combining dissimilar elements in his boxes, which Simic confirms in the next sentence.

The last sentence of the Preface, “I had hoped to do the same,” provides a past perfect with the first person subject referring to Simic. The past perfect posits something occurring before something else, both of which must be in the past. In a preface of a published work, the past perfect implies an action desired before the production of the book. The reader must conceive Simic's original intention, to shuffle and compose without expectation of the final product the way Cornell did, as being reported after the work was finished. In this instance, Simic’s “had hoped” hints that his hope was not satisfied, something happened, which is left unstated, that did not permit it to occur.211

Distorting the verb tenses that conclude the Preface disrupts the reader’s sense of time, but also warps the reader’s sense of space through the changing points of view. Kant posits space and time as the two a priori concepts necessary for reason. When Simic undermines such a basic premise of our reason (and thus relationship to reality), the reader is destabilized and must seek out alternatives to reason. This disorientation continues. After the Preface, Simic provides a Chronology, which distills the major moments of Cornell’s biography as they occurred from life to death. Despite the strange tone at the end of the Preface, Simic establishes a normative introduction to the artist such as any reader might expect in an art book. The narrative shift of the first text of I.Medici Slot Machine, “Traveler in a Strange World”—quoted in full on the first

page of this chapter—ruptures the temporary stability of the Chronology. The reader’s orientation while engaged in reading a book on “the art of Joseph Cornell” must keep changing. Simic leads the reader down the road less traveled by which Simic has chosen to present Cornell and his work.

“Traveler in a Strange World” leaps from one location to the next, using “next” on each new line as a coordinating principle.212 The Schwartzmann Branch of the New York City Library at 42nd street is famously guarded by two stone lions, one on each side of the steps where “a white pigeon is pecking” in Simic’s first line, which is an extended subject with no active verb—a sentence fragment. That fragmented quality supports the narrator’s uncertain sensation: “It’s like a dream, I thought.” The pigeon is seen “[n]ext, on the table of a storefront fortuneteller pecking the eyes of the king of hearts”—reinforcing the magical reality of a dreamtime. “Next,” the pigeon is perched on the “shoulder of a black man riding a bicycle at daybreak down Sixth avenue.” These leaps from one position to the “next” have no connecting passages and are thus fragments of activity. The reader must abandon linked progression.

The choice to position the reader on Sixth Avenue also introduces a number of directional distortions. Sixth Avenue is the road at the back entrance to one of the world’s great research libraries, potentially suggesting that the categorized and catalogued are being circumvented. The concluding visual image of this first text is reminiscent of a film’s final shot as two characters ride into the distance, though in this case a sunrise, not the customary sunset. From a literal point of view, the man and pigeon would be going against traffic if they were

212 This is a typical feature of prose poetry, as will be examined in greater depth in a later section with reference to Jonathan Monroe’s *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre*, Fabienne Moore’s *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment: Delimiting Genre*, Michel Delville’s *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*, and the account provided in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. 
cycling “down Sixth Avenue” because Sixth Avenue traffic moves uptown. Behind the library, into the sunrise, against the flow, directions are being flipped in every way. Lastly, Sixth Avenue is known as Avenue of the Americas, which implies that the work of Joseph Cornell, though a little strange, is still very much the work of a homegrown American artist. Despite specific location signs to familiarize the reader, the geography of this landscape is disorienting. Just as time was abandoned, space is no longer a certain framework either. Simic’s choice of title, “Traveller in a Strange World,” encapsulates the scene described and the reader’s experience within this text. This strange world is not steadied by the axes of space and time.

What is real? What is not? The next few pieces strew information for the reader to collect, much as Cornell picked items in thrift shops. They address the life of Cornell, but also introduce other characters, historical and fictional. “Miss Delphine” is the second text and introduces Cornell through a comparison to the historical Miss Delphine Binger who collected wishbones of assorted poultry, just as Cornell foraged in thrift shops to amass collections of odds and ends. “The Man on the Dump” presents Cornell as the fictional Bartleby—gaunt, reclusive, but faithful to his convictions—while also providing some family history.213 This strange land is populated by real and imagined characters. Joseph Cornell fits in both realms. His story cannot be collapsed into history.

The short pieces begin to develop a rhythm like Cornell’s own wanderings, a flâneur strolling the city. The reader must cross from text to text, from metaphor to analogy, fictional illusion to historical entry, finding as Cornell did at the end of one long walk an “unusual feeling

---

213 How not to think of the Wallace Stevens poem by the same name? The last stanza begins: “One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail./ One beats and beats for that which one believes./ That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all/ Be merely oneself” and concludes, “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.”
of satisfaction and accomplishment, unexpected and more abiding than usual.”\(^2\) Within the various compositions by Simic, the reader learns that Cornell had a “home of Utopia Parkway,” “roamed the streets of New York from the late 1920s till his death in 1972,” and that “one day in 1931 he saw some compasses in one shop window and some boxes in the next, and it occurred to him to put them together.” Simic includes these reports without references or footnotes, but their specificity is distinctive among the otherwise expressive and interpretive sentences. The fourth extracts a passage from Cornell’s journal of January 24, 1947. Simic’s Cornell is a recluse, a collector, a wanderer; he is faithful to Christian Science, his family, the poetry of the French Romantics and Symbolists. The diarist who appreciated “that kind of richness in which a reveling in detail becomes such a feast of experience,” sought the small and strange in side street thrift shops, transforming scraps into celebrated art.\(^2\) This world does not engage the established, reputable, or reasonable. Simic wanted to copy Cornell’s method, but to follow Simic’s text, the reader must likewise find pleasure in connecting the unexpected. The imagination must work.

**A POETRY SLOT MACHINE: THE IMAGINATION AT WORK**

The reader has no choice but to engage the imagination in reading Simic’s texts because they are not anchored in the cause-and-effect linearity of reason. The imagination has been

---

\(^2\) ibid., 14, 16.
\(^2\) ibid, 8.
viewed suspiciously in the Western tradition since Adam and Eve imagined and sinned.\textsuperscript{217} Socrates is no kinder to the imagination or its products in Plato’s \textit{Dialogues}. Aristotle attempts a type of ethical redemption. The Medieval Church rejected all imaginative creations (pagan beliefs, apocryphal gospels) beyond its purview, while offering a profusion of myth and mythic thinking that the Enlightenment’s heralding of reason hoped to diminish.\textsuperscript{218} The period known as the Enlightenment was so called precisely for its rejection of the murky formulations of religious myths in favor of the clear light of individual reason. \textsuperscript{219} Scientific experimentation and logic became the touchstones of reason. The imagination was disdained as a veil to truth.

Simic’s book on Joseph Cornell was labeled and accepted as an art book and yet, why? Art History stems from the intellectual efforts of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{220} The discipline is notably dedicated to a clear and careful methodology and voice. To accept a work such at Charles Simic’s \textit{Dime Store Alchemy} undermines the critical philosophical system developed by Kant and

\textsuperscript{217} Kearney shows the rejection of the imagination in the Talmudic tradition in Chapter 1 of \textit{The Wake of Imagination}. Only God was permitted to create and imagine and His imagination is the only right vision. To do so ourselves was a sin against divine perfection, as exemplified in the exile from Eden. When Adam and Eve “imagine” by eating the apple, new worlds open up to them and they must depart the garden. The choice to imagine is a disobedience to God. Imagination introduces alternatives to divine perfections and leads mankind astray by offering options. As soon as choice appears, deities (and idols) appear as opponents to the absolute divinity of God. The imagination creates gods, as Simic says, “making deities is what we do in our reverie,” \textit{Dime Store Alchemy}, 57.

\textsuperscript{218} Much disagreement exists on when the Age of Enlightenment began, with dates ranging from 1637, with the publication of Descartes’ \textit{Discourse on Method}, to 1687, when Newton published \textit{The Principia}. Some consider the period over with the French Revolution of 1789, while others use the Napoleonic Wars of 1804.

\textsuperscript{219} Though Enlightenment thinkers are varied in their conceptions of the world, the mind, being, and nature, their writings show a consistent appreciation for a systematic methodology that is a break from the strong faith of the previous thousand years. See Jay Cassirer’s \textit{The Philosophy of the Enlightenment} and Peter Jay’s discussion on the nature of the \textit{philosophes’} unity of thought in his two volume set, \textit{The Enlightenment}.


; and most introductions to Art History anthologies, such as E. C Fernie, ed., \textit{Art History and Its Methods : A Critical Anthology} (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996), or Michael Hatt, \textit{Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).
expanded into each field of study.221 A century earlier, however, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) provided an explanation of knowledge in The Ethics that includes the imagination alongside reason and, what he calls, intuitive science.222 Simic’s book invites us to alter our perspective, and to seek out different models for how we think.

For Spinoza, the imagination does not undermine reason.223 Imagination is “a form of bodily awareness which means awareness of both our body and the other bodies with which we enter in contact,” and accounts for perception, memory, and induction, none of which are possible for the others.224 Imagination transforms perceptions into universal notions (induction), by associations given through memory and by perceptions of the social and natural world. The

221 Like Vasari’s Michelangelo for Renaissance art, Immanuel Kant is the model of great Enlightenment thought. His analyses, both in content and form, defined the path philosophy would take as others emulated and responded to his ideas. Immanuel Kant was born on April 22, 1724 and died February 12, 1804, producing his great works in the last thirty years of his life: Critique of Pure Reason (first edition 1781 and second edition 1787); Critique of Practical Reason (1788); Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790). In the first edition of the Critique of Pure Reason (1781), Kant allows imagination a transcendental role due to its synthesizing function that brings the intuitions of sensation into single images (A95-A130). In the second edition, six years later, Kant diminishes imagination’s role by distinguishing between imagination’s function as a figurative synthesis and the transcendental schematism which allows for the intellectual activity of reason. Imagination has no role in the activity of reason for Kant, even if it supplies the material to be schematized. The imagination can constantly apprehend sense data, but is limited in its ability to comprehend those apprehensions. Critique of the Power of Judgment, his final work, introduces an important role for the imagination but only for aesthetic judgments, since the nature of a judgment of beauty is to conceive the object’s form. Still, the imagination has no intellectual capacity. Kant institutes the “conventional division between reason and imagination, science and art, and thus also between critique and creativity...critique collapses into cognitivism, and imagination is treated either mediately or aesthetically,” Chiara Bottici, “Another Enlightenment: Spinoza on Myth and Imagination,” Constellations 19, no. 4 (2013), 593. Though abstract pure reason might not apply to the objects of experience, such thinking was the supreme goal. In contrast, the imagination is left in the dust of sense data, processing perceptions. As Derrida showed in De la gramma
tologie, this division between reason and imagination uses reason to prefer reason, thus easily dismissing imagination as false.

222 Spinoza’s life spans the period debated as the beginning of the Enlightenment (see footnote 4). Given his time period, some read him as marking the end of the Medieval period. His thoroughly propositional analysis of ideas, however, is in keeping with the Newtonian method adapted for nearly all philosophical inquiry during the Enlightenment, which leads others, including Bottici, to include him as an Enlightenment thinker.9 Spinoza’s three parts of knowledge—imagination, reason, and intuitive science—reveal knowledge differently, but are of equal value as they are only differentiated by degree, Chiara Bottici, “Another Enlightenment,” 596).

223 Defining Spinoza’ terms is no easier than working with Kant’s interwoven definitions. Scholars debate how reason and intuitive science are to be distinguished, since definitions seem to change across Spinoza’s works. See Spencer Carr’s synopsis of the debates on the terms, and his attempt at a resolution, in “Spinoza's Distinction Between Rational and Intuitive Knowledge” in The Philosophical Review, 87.2 (1978), 241-252.

224 Chiara Bottici, “Another Enlightenment,” 595-6; Benedictus de Spinoza, The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. 1: The Ethics, trans. E. M. Curley (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1985), II P40S2. This focus on the body for Spinoza is in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s aim to deterritorialize the face, to avoid the disembodiment that comes from facialization, and to keep attempting the becoming-animal, as discussed in the chapter on T.J. Clark.
imagination relates elements that are not associated by cause-and-effect (reason), or perceptual proximity (intuitive science).\textsuperscript{225} Imagination offers a narrative of relations.\textsuperscript{226} Only the imagination can combine things (such as horse and man) to produce a non-existent thing (centaur).\textsuperscript{227} The analogies of the imagination in Simic’s work on Cornell correspond to this relational role for the imagination. The magic of the imagination occurs in the act of association, as Simic states in “Where Chance Meets Necessity.”

Somewhere in the city of New York there are four or five still-unknown objects that belong together. Once together they’ll make a work of art. That’s Cornell’s premise, his metaphysics, and his religion, which I wish to understand. [...] The city has an infinite number of interesting objects in an infinite number of unlikely places.\textsuperscript{228}

The parallel structure of the last sentence creates relationship, so that interesting objects occur in relation to unlikely places, and unlikely objects will be found in interesting places.

\textsuperscript{225} Reason labors to apprehend the causal connections that constitute the essence of the thing examined. Stephen Nadler, in the \textit{Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy}, explains: “Reason is the apprehension of the essence of a thing through a discursive, inferential procedure. ‘A true idea means nothing other than knowing a thing perfectly, or in the best way’ (Ethics IIP43s). It involves grasping a thing’s causal connections not just to other objects but, more importantly, to the attributes of God and the infinite modes (the laws of nature).” Intuitive science instantaneously grasps what Reason analyzes, but that means intuitive science has no knowledge of the thing’s particular attributes, which is why Reason provides greater understanding of what is known. Intuitive science is locked in the particular perspective of place and time in the world (both literally and figuratively). Its spontaneity does not permit for relational associations. Only reason can explain the necessity of a cause and its effect but since no man has been able to reason why things necessarily are as they are, the ability to comprehend through reason is limited.\textsuperscript{226} Despite the deficits of each form of knowledge, only the imagination is “the sole cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second and third kind is necessarily true,” Spinoza, \textit{The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. 1}, EII P41. Knowledge gained by reason or intuitive science must be true but that does not mean imagination is necessarily false. The imagination can relate association in a confused narrative, but that does not make its parts inherently wrong. Imagination can never be completely false, since ideas are “nothing but conceptions of the mind”; if the mind is “just the body that is felt and thought,” it follows that the mind “can never be completely false because the connection between ideas is the same as the connection between things,” where the connection between things cannot be false because things are truly as they are Chiara Bottici, “Another Enlightenment,” 597. No matter how inadequate our imaginings, they offer possible relationships between ideas, just as between external bodies. If this seemed questionable at one time, brain scans now show a physiology of thought, even if what that physiology reveals about thought remains unclear.\textsuperscript{227} That is not a rejection of reality: “For if the mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things do not really exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its own nature and not to a vice,” Spinoza, \textit{The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. 1}, EII P17S). As long as what is imagined remains distinguished from what can be confirmed, then imagining something poses no problem.\textsuperscript{228} Simic, \textit{Dime-Store Alchemy}, 14.
Chance permits Cornell to “reveal the self and its obsessions.” In the happenstance he found what he wanted to produce. Chance found things that were unknown to one another, having no causal or proximal relation to unite them. Only his imagination, however, could place them together. The imagination uncovers the extraordinary. The proto-surrealist Giorgio De Chirico said, “One can deduce and conclude that every object has two aspects: one current one, which we see nearly always and which is seen by men in general; and the other, which is spectral and metaphysical and seen only by rare individuals,” but Cornell does not conform to this dualism. Simic cannot find nor describe a simple man who made boxes, but uncovers and reveals Cornell’s kaleidoscopic mind.

In “Are You Ready Mary Baker Eddy?” Simic quotes one of the leaders of the surrealist movement, André Breton, who fervently believed the mind capable of great feats—if willing to go beyond the purview of the everyday. Breton challenged himself and others to think otherly, and find ways of exploring how to break out of the common codes of art and literature, first as a member of the brief Dada movement and then more substantially with Surrealism. If the Dada movement fractured conceptions, Surrealism tried to relate the broken pieces into new configurations, which might then disclose options to transform reality as it is mundanely perceived.

André Breton says in the Second Surrealist Manifesto: “Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.” That point is somewhere in the labyrinth, and the labyrinth is the city of New York.

---

229 Simic, Dime-Store Alchemy, 61.
230 ibid., 26.
231 ibid., 21.
Mary Baker Eddy was the founder of Christian Science, which holds that the mind is capable of curing disease. The goal was to focus and widen one’s mind beyond the conflicts within the self. Here Breton is likewise identifying a “point of the mind” wherein oppositions, or in Kantian terminology “the antinomies,” are dispelled. Certainty may be desired, but analogies cannot be avoided. They are “the place where our separate intuitions momentarily link up.”

One walks great lengths in the mind’s labyrinth to find such a point of revelation. Such a place will not be found easily, but requires wandering the labyrinth, much like Cornell's thrift shop searches around New York City. And so, one image layers on another, in a series of equitable predicates.

The labyrinth becomes an important metaphor across a number of Simic’s poems. The labyrinth is associated with the city of New York but much more. In “The Romantic Movement,” Simic states “[t]he city is a labyrinth of analogies” where “the real and the imagined...cease to be perceived as contradictions.” A point where contradictions cease exists inside the labyrinth, which is the city of New York, but the city is itself yet another labyrinth—a labyrinth of analogies. Like the minotaur hidden inside a labyrinth that Theseus must enter and negotiate in order to slay the monster who requires the life of so many young Athenians, both the city and the labyrinth are interchangeable terms for the puzzle of existence. They are analogous to one another, even as they are constituted of other analogies, parallels and connections. One interest leads to another idea in Simic’s labyrinthine language. The reader follows the thread deeper into the mystery.

---

232 Simic, Dime-Store Alchemy, 11.
233 ibid., 11.
234 This allusion to the minotaur also associates Cornell’s passion for the French Surrealists who founded an influential magazine called Le Minotaure.
If the referential figure of the pre-modern mimetic imagination is the mirror, and the expressive figure of the lamp is used to represent the expressive and productive imagination of the modern, Kearny postulates that the postmodern imagination is found in the reflexive figure of the labyrinth or looking glass. Simic might agree in the last poem of the first section. He concludes “A Force Illegible” with another analogy that brings together the magic of this vast interrelated realm.

The city is a huge image machine. A slot machine for the solitaries. Coins of reverie, of poetry, of secret passion, religious madness, it converts them all. A force illegible.

Labyrinth, city, soul, all made of analogies, are also an image machine. The city dispenses images for those individuals willing to offer their dreams, art, erotics, ecstasy for grand visions. These analogies and conversions cannot be de-scribed, that is constituted of writing and made logical. They are powered by a force illegible.

The machine like any myth has heterogeneous parts. There must be gear wheels, cogs, and other clever contrivances attached to the crank. Whatever it is, it must be ingenious. Our loving gaze can turn it on. A poetry slot machine offering a jackpot of incommensurable meanings activated by our imagination. Its mystic repertoire has many images.

Image machine, poetry slot machine, myth, analogous to city, labyrinth, and soul, are each made distinctive. They serve their respective positions, designed cleverly and waiting to be put in motion. Whether “it” is the city, labyrinth, or machine, “it” is required to “be ingenious,” an inspired and unique creation. The fire in our eyes and heart ignites the machine, which accepts “coins of reverie, of poetry, of secret passion, religious madness” in exchange for visions not to be judged by any standard other than their own. Only such a personal gamble will win “a jackpot

236 Simic, Dime-Store Alchemy, 30.
237 ibid., 29.
of incommensurable meanings.” Love is required to believe that analogous offerings can return the singular and incommensurable, and such conviction is only made possible by the imagination, the generative force of this wild machine. The imagination is a “loving gaze” that, once turned on, receives endless offerings, each unlike any other, even though mechanic production is alike. Internally heterogeneous, the imagination spawns analogies, reapportioning proportions to put things into endless, kaleidoscopic, new relations.

EKPHRASTIC RELATIONS

Relationship is fundamental to the workings of the imagination, and to the classical rhetoric device, ekphrasis. Campbell described Simic’s work as “a virtuosic work of ekphrasis” because Simic spins such alternative encounters with Cornell’s boxes.238 Ekphrasis, understood as “to speak out fully,” was defined by Theon as “descriptive speech which brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes.”239 As a “term to mean ‘description of a work of art’” ekphrasis does not appear before the nineteenth century, which was then retroactively applied to Greek and Latin texts.240 To “bring the thing shown vividly before the eyes” was an important rhetorical

---

exercise in the elite education of the Classical Greek and Roman world as discovered in preserved manuscripts of the *progymnasmata*.\(^{241}\)

The visual effect of ekphrasis was produced in the mind of the audience. In the ekphrastic picture, “the guide not only ‘shows’ but directs his or her audience’s attention, adding order and meaning to the undifferentiated mass of sights which is presented...[he] not only makes ‘visible’ the appearance of a subject but makes something about its nature intelligible.”\(^{242}\) Ekphrasis was noted for its *enargeia*, the vividness of the language to make scenes and objects visible, via a narrative of relations among them.\(^{243}\) Use of detail, repetitive rhetorical devices, contextual information establishing character, all created the *enargeia* of the ekphrasis, which thus allowed the *phantasia*, that is impressions in the audience’s mind. Ekphrasis allowed audiences to feel they were involved in the subject matter, precisely because of the rhetorical manipulation of *enargeia* to produce *phantasia*, that is an imagination.\(^{244}\) If the speech had adequate *enargeia*, audiences had the experience of engaging the argument by imagining each step, visualizing each moment as it was described.

\(^{241}\) The Progymnasmata “were a keystone of the education process of the elite, marking the transition from grammar to rhetoric and presenting the student with a set of literary, linguistic and ethical concepts.” There were multiple exercises in which the student had to demonstrate rhetorical ability. These rhetorical devices include: “fable (muthos), using animal character to illustrate a moral, and a simple narrative (diegema) usually taken from mythology, through exercises in praise (enkomion) and blame (psogos), to the systematic discussion of a general question such as whether one should marry (thesis) and the introduction of a law (nomou eisphora). Other exercises include the chreia, kataskeue and amaskeue, the confirmation of refutation of a story on the basis of certain criteria like probability; koinos topos (Common place), a rehearsal of the commonly held opinions about a certain type of person (such as a murderer or a temple-robber); synkrisis, or comparison, in which one thing is proved better or worse than another by systematic comparison of the qualities of both; prosopopoia or ethopoia, a speech in the words of a character in a certain situation” and ekphrasis, Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, 42-3. The texts formulated by the student were not “closed literary forms but open to endless manipulation, elaboration and discussion,” ibid., 45.

\(^{242}\) ibid., 254.

\(^{243}\) Webb explains: “The adjective *enarges* originally meant ‘clearly visible’, so its later rhetorical use to designate speech which appeals to the mind’s eye is itself metaphorical. This constant resort to metaphor in the discussions of ekphrasis suggests that the ideas evoked exceeded in complexity the technical language available to express them. But it may also indicate something about ekphrasis itself: that it is an effect which transcends categories and normal expectations of language...The language of illusion, approximation and semblance is deeply embedded in the discussions of ekphrasis,” 53.

The imagination is not foolproof, because it must translate from one mode to another, as Simic writes in his blog post “Year in Fragments,” for the New York Review of Books website: “Much of what our eyes see and our ears hear is lost in translation.”\textsuperscript{245} The French literature scholar Michel Beaujour’s finds ekphrasis is generated from a need to connect, “justified when the described place or thing causes a strong emotion, filling the disoriented describer with yearning: he then undertakes to provoke with words an analogous emotion in the reader.”\textsuperscript{246}

Simic exhibits ekphrasis in his text “Untitled (Bébé Marie), Early 1940s” on Cornell’s box by the same name. Simic describes and interprets the elements of the box to produce a narrative that his reader can accept. His construction is personal, but the elements he discusses are there in the box, present for all.

The chubby doll in a forest of twigs. Her eyes are open and her lips and cheeks are red. While her mother was busy with other things, she went to her purse, took out the makeup, and painted her face in front of a mirror. Now she’s to be punished.

A spoiled little girl wearing a straw hat about to be burnt at the stake. One can already see the flames in her long hair entangled with the twigs. Her eyes are wide open so she can watch us watching her.

All this is vaguely erotic and sinister.\textsuperscript{247}

The incomplete opening sentence states the main objects of the box, though “a forest of twigs” is already an interpretation of the mass of sticks. The second sentence focuses on the facial features of the doll. The third sentence suggests a narrative for how cheeks and lips might become red on a little girl, thereby transfiguring the doll into a person.

Simic develops a narrative about the assorted elements of the box by using the Western notion that a little girl should not wear make-up, because it symbolizes the vanities that

\textsuperscript{246} Michel Beaujour, “Some Paradoxes of Description,” Yale French Studies, no. 61 (January 1, 1981), 57.
\textsuperscript{247} Simic, Dime-Store Alchemy, 47.
transform her into a mature woman, with sexual undertones from make-up’s theatrical past associated with prostitution. The little girl must therefore be punished; twigs have been gathered so she may “be burnt at the stake.” The shift from doll to little girl brings her to life, and thus enlivened, “she can watch us watching her.” The makeup and subsequent disciplining introduces sexuality and its suppression so that our voyeurism becomes “erotic and sinister.”

Simic turns Cornell’s strange box into a creepy and disconcerting tale. Though the elements of the box are common to any viewer and thus create an image about which most would list the same details (doll, twigs, orange tones), how they are combined and narrated is both individual to Simic’s creativity, and each reader’s imaginative rendition of his words.

Simic’s “description” of Cornell’s Untitled (Bébé Marie) is certainly a description of a work of art, but it also operates to interpret and convince his audience towards a way of seeing. Simic’s portrayal tries to make sense of “the chubby doll in a forest of twigs” with a story that leaves the reader agreeing that “all this is vaguely erotic and sinister.” Simic’s imagination weaves a way of knowing the box that is individual and collective, based on individual

---

248 Hispanic cultures, as well as assorted non-Western cultural groups, do not have this same bias against girls’ sexuality. The basis for punishment is the idea that a little girl should not be pretending to be older than she is. If, however, the culture determines that she ought to represent herself as maturing then the make-up becomes acceptable. Though many white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants might object to their six-year old daughter painting her face with lipstick, rouge and eyeshadow, the same is not true for all. With that in mind, my interpretation of Simic’s response to the box is staked in this WASP presumption.

249 Keats in a letter to Richard Wodehouse on October 27, 1818 writes that the poetical character “does not harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation,” John Keats, Selected Letters, ed. Robert Gittings, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 148. Simic’s disturbing turn then can be accepted precisely because the poet permits and acknowledges speculation, while the philosopher hopes to avoid it in virtuously seeking certainty and justice.
experience, but also through concepts within the community that surround the individual. He includes not only elements that every one and all can see in the box, but interprets them in a manner that is based in a contemporary Western culture. Simic’s tale of the doll as a little girl wearing make-up, who is punished for an erotic display that challenges the mother’s by being burned at the stake, is feasible because of the cultural reports on little girl’s beauty pageants, Freud’s mother-daughter tensions, the Salem Witch trials, and a youth culture desperate to be seen on adult terms. The words describe the box, but also a narrative that allows the reader to join Simic in his rendition. The story he compiles is not easy to dismiss because his description is convincing.

Though the term ekphrasis is used today as a response to a work of art (usually writing on visual art, but also applied to a painting from a musical score, or a sculpture from a story), this relational origin reveals how ekphrastic texts subtly encourage the reader to see the art through the provided terms. In addition, the individual can return to the box and collect an impression based on a set of personal reference points. Neither the individual nor the social context is determinative: “It is a theory of collective imaginings, which accounts for the fact that our act of imagining is the result of both, an individual and collective experience.” As a rhetorical device, ekphrasis was defined by its effect on the audience. The imagination was deemed key to the effective outcome of an ekphrasis, since the speaker and audience need to be able to see what

---

250 Spinoza provides the example of a cavalier who, seeing traces in the sand of a horse, will think of a horse, then a horsemman, and then war. A farmer noticing the same traces will pass from horse, to plow, to field and so forth, Spinoza, The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. 1, EII P18S). Erwin Panofsky in his Introduction to Meaning in the Visual Arts says something similar about the particular visual aspect of the aesthetic experience: “When a man looks at a tree from the point of view of a carpenter, he will associate it with the various uses to which he might put the wood; and when he looks at it from the point of an ornithologist he will associate it with the birds that might nest in it. When a man at a horse race watches the animal on which he has put his money, he will associate its performance with his desire that it may win. Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically,” Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts, 11.

251 Chiara Bottici, “Another Enlightenment,” 597. Many of Spinoza’s notions on imagination as an individual and collective experience are currently redeemed in the science of vision.
was described. Imagination connected orator and audience, establishing the terms of their mutual relationship. This effect remains significant for art writing, drawing explicit attention to the communicative function of rhetorical discourse and that connection between ekphrastic author and audience.

**Artwriting Communities**

Before photography and film, an ekphrasis aimed to provide a factual representation in language of the image, allowing readers to imagine (recreate) the picture in their mind’s eye. Unless it misidentified a figure or detail, an ekphrasis therefore could not be wrong, only limited in its attention to detail, or dry and boring. Diderot wrote art reviews of the annual salons that were intended to describe the works for those who had not been able to attend, and much art writing (Goethe, Baudelaire, Ruskin, Goncourt brothers, Roger Fry) replicated this approach. This structured accounting of the art work’s elements rarely still occurs, in part due to the propagation of photographs and online store houses of images. Now, writers may presume that their readers have access to the images, if desired, and are free to express ideas about the works and not just facts about its appearance.

The art historian construct a narrative based in cause-and-effect, aiming for a logical ordering that supports her insights. Richard Wollheim perceives three narrative approaches used

---

252 Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, 104.
by art historians. A causal argument draws the lines between the social class or particular economic base and the production of the art work, essentially a restatement of the Marxist concept that human activity is caused by social circumstance. The expressive approach reveals how an art work illustrates a cultural value, or crisis; the focus of the interpretation is often on the subject matter of the work. Parallelism uses an anecdote of the artist’s life, or of the society at the time, as an analogy rather than a necessary connection (as in the first approach). Such approaches permit the art writer’s account to become accepted as a possible truth about the work and artist. Details about the work’s visual appearance are often provided to identify the picture, but Carrier argues that, whether poetic or academic, “an ekphrasis is highly selective both in the details that it mentions and in the use it makes of those details.” The writer’s imagination produces stories, which are accepted as interpretations of works of art when they follow certain narrative constructs.

Spinoza explains that governed uses of the imagination create stable patterns of behavior which designate participation in the community, “myths, rituals, and other collective forms of discipline of imagination are an essential ingredient of politics.” Designating the acceptable

---

253 Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History’s History*, 2nd ed (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice Hall, 2001), 145-6. Alternatively, David Carrier find that art writers apply ten codes, a term he defines as a “distinctive way of describing an art work” and which he draws out of Barthes S/Z. He develops this idea of codes from Barthes’ S/Z. Four of the ten are codes were used by seicento writers but remain in use: contemporary commentary, naturalism/realism, playacting, and public response. The other six appear in more recent art writings: allegory/symbolism, attributions, cultural history, homosexuality, pictorial quotation/self-expression, and theories of art, Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, 53. Carrier dates himself in addressing homosexuality, since 21st century examinations of sex have largely shifted from focusing on the hetero-homo dichotomy to a wider engagement with gender performativity.


255 Bottici, “Another Enlightenment,” 595. Lyotard reiterates many of these notions in his discussion of narrative in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, see particularly sections 6 and 8. Spinoza addressed the nature of the Judeo-Christian tradition with the stories that shaped the Jewish people and then Christians. He argues that belief in god came to be pervasive by filling the void that appeared when a group of slaves were freed from an absolute and autocratic Egyptian ruler. Myths of divine preference inspired hope to a people who knew none. As the Old Testament often shows, fear provides one form of discipline, but stories must also orient the individual towards an ideal and better world, lest their fear and anger lead them to desperate acts. Each society develops its own narratives, as a “sort of social organization of hope to tame the antagonistic passions of the individuals.”
narratives also means rejecting others, so that restrictions are a part of the community’s cohesive narrative of identity. Rules around appropriate art writing, therefore, also exist in part to reinforce a communal background and similar expectations. Social stories, whether creation myths or a narrative of art’s progress, unite the group, but may also become totalitarian, used to subordinate the society.

When the beings of imagination are taken as true laws of nature, they turn into superstition (TTP XVIII). In other words, political myths must be recognized for what they are: narratives that provide significance to the particular conditions and needs of a given social group by putting particular exemplars of human nature on the stage...Beings of imagination can be used to teach moral knowledge or even to ground a political community, but we should always be aware that they are what they are—beings of imagination. Nothing more, but also nothing less.256

Stories, and art works of all kind, have been and will likely always sometimes be developed to control a population and its relationships with other communities. These codes permit community-gathering by coalescing groups around common tales, while rejecting others. The methodological divisions within any discipline, including art history, are an example of this community identification and relationship.

The rules that surround how narratives get told may then be seen as political constraints. As Ruth Webb clearly states “ekphrasis is part of a fictional creation which is far from neutral or innocent.”257 The way anything gets described is formulated, including any discussion of art. When art is expected to appear in a particular way, when our descriptions of art are meant to follow certain guidelines, then the imagination that has created those governances has been made authoritative and may require an imaginative revolution. Methodological conflicts exist within the discipline of art history, but a resistance to other disciplines can also be found, and certainly

---

256 Bottici, “Another Enlightenment,” 603.
257 Webb, Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice, 75.
anything outside of non-fiction prose is unacceptable, except as decoration to open or close a
straight text. An established formula to produce its scholarship exists, and other alternatives are
rarely viable, even though Baudelaire once wrote, and others agree, that the best form of art
criticism would be a poem. Simic’s book may be unorthodox but only because we have grown
accustomed to a set of laws that regulate the form of art writing.

In reaction to such shackles, however, imagination is also the power by which new ideas
are generated. New stories begin to appear, shared as alternative cultural myths within the
community. These normative regulations, however, have already been disturbed. The approaches
to art history were re-imagined by feminist scholars such as Linda Nochlin or Griselda Pollock.
T.J. Clark proposed the society as significant to the understanding of the art. These approaches
have become formalized narrative approaches that are no longer critical, as Clark expostulated in
*The Sight of Death*. The acceptance of these approaches highlights how “the more parsimonious
account, as well as the most speculative interpretation, must go beyond the undisputed visual
evidence,” because the visual evidence could be applied for different purposes. Imagination is
present in artwriting, and art writers are increasingly self-conscious that interpretations are not
direct transmissions.

Interpretations of artworks never transparently present those artifacts as they
really are. Artwriting has become self-conscious about its own status. In a
Hegelian history, once such self-consciousness is achieved the story is concluded.
History must come to an end. But in our world, unlike the one Hegel so
imaginatively describes, the development of art history continues.

Despite misunderstandings of Danto’s idea that art is dead, despite Baudrillard’s
conviction that critical judgment is not possible, art continues and so does its story. New art, new

---

258 Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, 190.
259 ibid., 217.
forms of art writing, and new critiques of both will be necessary. There have been few alternative formulations of writing art history, but they are growing—in form, such as Clark’s journal; in attitude, such as Linda Nochlin’s amusing essay on Lucian Freud in *Artforum*, “Frayed Freud;” or Dave Hickey’s personal reflections on the culture.\footnote{Dave Hickey is often pigeonholed as a cheap exponent of pop culture, but he is also a serious writer on art whose thoughts on beauty are formulated and conceived within the traditional discourse.} The fact that Charles Simic is a respected poet may have provided the cultural permission for him to launch into such unfamiliar terrain. Each of these iconoclasts participates in a community of art writers who are just as interested in experiment and exploration.

*Dime Store Alchemy* belongs to a growing collection of alternative writings on art. Simic is in good company even if each one identifies and is perceived as an outsider to the core disciplinary community of art history. On the other hand, Simic very much attaches himself to a traditional attitude of art history. He writes in the *Preface*:

> In writing the pieces for this book, I hoped to emulate his way of working and come to understand him that way. It is worth pointing out that Cornell worked in the absence of any aesthetic theory and previous notions of beauty...I had hoped to do the same.\footnote{Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy*, ix-x.}

Though Cornell was not modeling his work on any particular theory, Simic’s choice to follow Cornell finds root in a theory of art appreciation. Erwin Panofsky in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* wrote that the humanist engages in a subjective mental process of synthesizing in order to “re-enact the actions and to re-create the creations” so that the best way to understand the picture is
to penetrate the artist’s “intentions and read his thoughts while pondering on his acts.” Simic aimed for nothing less.

Whereas humanists want to match an interpretation to “some hypothetical reconstruction of the artist’s intentions,” such a test is methodologically flawed as we can have only indirect knowledge of these intentions. Simic does suppose that he has insight into Cornell, an attitude that occurs in every viewer who has spent a considerable amount of time with a work of art or the research on an artist, whether for professional or personal reasons. The novelist Siri Hustvedt wrote in her book of essays regarding favorite paintings, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, that “those who analyze works of art for a living are not exempt from blind spots. Because few people anticipate that they will find anything new in a very old or very famous painting, they don’t. Expectation prevents discovery.” Subjectivity can influence what is seen by contributing or limiting insights. The certainty that a painting is about one thing and not another cannot be avoided. Rather than ignoring or dismissing these moments, perhaps they deserve to be analyzed as well. Carrier recommends that we consider whether an intentionalist interpretation helps illuminate the work of art, which is what Hustvedt attempts about her conviction that Vermeer’s *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* must be a type of Annunciation picture. So long as the

---

262 Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 14. Panofsky’s seemingly subjective interpretation develops objectivity, first by his iconographic analyses that posited a universal code for interpreting elements of the images, and which could then be judged on the analysis’ ability to unifying all the threads of the picture and details of the artist’s life. The analysis that could weave the most threads was the most universal and objective. Panofsky’s influence in the field and the clarity of his method and thought makes him a common example of this general intellectual attitude. (A nice, brief explanation of Panofsky’s method and influence can be found in Svetlana Alpers’ “Is Art History?” in *Daedalus* 106:3 (1977): 4-5.)


264 ibid., 11-25.
interpretation illuminates intriguing possibilities, what damage is done to the community in accepting an unorthodox method?265

With that in mind, I argue that reading personal reflections on the work of art, as described in poetry, personal essays, or prose fiction, illuminates the work by guiding us to consider the work’s potential effect upon us as a viewer. Since all artwritings have a subjective element to them, observing those subjective elements will provide a reflection of the work. The choice to “emulate [Cornell’s] way of writing” has the humanist strain, but Simic’s final presentation veers from Panofsky’s own ordered writing. Though Simic followed a certain conceptual approach to artwriting, his formulation was radically different. If art-historical interpretations aim to provide meaning, Simic’s poetic language implies the meaning to be found in Cornell’s rather than explicitly stating it. Simic’s decision to use his imagination as an approach to Cornell is a refusal to distance himself from the artistic choices of the artist, a refusal to narrate art in the traditional way. His effort may not illuminate by focusing the lamp exclusively on the work, but it illuminates possible approaches to the work, revealing a labyrinth of light sources.

The communities around art will be dispersed if the stories do not continue to speak to new audiences and potential participants, many of whom enjoy and are accustomed to such light shows. Art writing will have to find a new lightness. Barolksy denounces the many stories about art that dim interest through “overly reductive interpretations” in “dry, fussy, nervous” language,

---

265 Svetlana Alpers suggests a similar condition when she says, “rather than pointing to the narrowness of Vasari’s definition of the perfection of art, as Rosenberg does, let us see what particular artistic phenomena he assembles under this term,” Svetlana Alpers, “Review of On Quality in Art, Criteria of Excellence, Past and Present by Jakob Rosenberg,” Art Bulletin 54, no. 1 (1972): 111.
more worried about possible attacks on their idea, rather than widening the field with enlightening suggestions in eloquent essays, or at least allowing their narrow revelations a “more poetic prose that itself gives pleasure.”

David Carrier, in “Artcriticism-writing, Arthistory-writing, and Artwriting,” explains that art historians aim towards a distancing objectivity, but that this distance is not fruitful if it is incapable of addressing a broader audience who deserve to be introduced to the passionate imagination of art as well as its history. Art historians lose the possibility of engaging their audience if they do not encourage writing that is “beautiful, playful, witty, and inspiring—in short, a pleasure to read” and do not renounce the notion that “graceful prose and seriousness of purpose were incompatible.”

There have always been those who did not approve of creativity in writings on art; Delacroix did not like the art writers of his own period because they judged “avec des idées de littérateurs” producing “striking and sometimes original stylistic effects” rather than simple reports on the paintings and sculptures. Delacroix presumed art would find an audience whereas today’s artists cannot be so certain of a continued engagement with art objects among today’s audiences. Barolsky guides his readers to poets (including Mark Strand, Richard

267 Paul Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” The Art Bulletin 78, no. 3 (September 1, 1996): 399-400.
Howard, Richard Wilbur, W.D. Snodgrass), whom he finds “have written with gusto, power and learning about art, even though they were not trained in the techniques of art-historical analysis. These poets, not we historians, have best articulated what art has to do with life, why it matters.”

THE PROSE POEM OF ARTWRITING

Charles Simic is not an art writer; he is not an art historian, nor a scholar per se. He is a poet, born in 1938 in Belgrade, Serbia, then a part of Yugoslavia. Simic describes himself as a “displaced person” and “one of the laboratory animals used in a series of famous historical experiments” in his essay “Refugees.” The impact of war-torn Europe appears regularly in his work and underlies his notion that “a poet is a member of that minority that refuses to be part of any official minority, because a poet knows what it is to belong among those walking in broad daylight, as well as among those hiding behind closed shutters.” Simic learned English, attending Hollywood films rather than school, when his family was waiting in Paris for visas that would allow them to embark for the United States, where they arrived on August 10, 1954.

An avid reader as a youth, he only discovered art and painting at his high school in Oak Park, Illinois, where he gravitated to other teenagers interested in the arts. Some friends showed him their efforts at poetry, but he was unimpressed: “I went home and wrote some poems myself in order to demonstrate to them how it’s supposed to be done.” Many years passed before his

---

270 Paul Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” 399.
272 ibid., 135.
273 ibid., 28.
poetry gained notice in the 1970s. James Billingham, of the Library of Congress, officially named Simic the 15th Poet Laureate in 2007, saying of the poet and his work: “He’s very hard to describe, and that’s a great tribute to him. His poems have a sequence that you encounter in dreams, and therefore they have a reality that does not correspond to the reality that we perceive with our eyes and ears.” Many others also allude to the dreamy quality of Simic’s poetry.

Mark Ford wrote in the New York Review of Books that Simic’s work considers “whatever eludes or is suppressed by the kinds of narrative that offer to make sense of our lives only at the cost of dangerously simplifying the contradictory, incomplete, and random nature of experience.”

Best known for his prose poetry, Simic’s writing challenges readers with complexity within the sparcity. Among his many honors, Charles Simic was granted a MacArthur “Genius” Grant for the period of 1984-1989, and received the poetry Pulitzer in 1990 for World Without End. He has taught poetry, written essays on art, politics, and philosophy (including a popular blog on the New York Review of Books website), but for all his ranging interests and passionate intellectual capacity, he is not a scholar of art history. He attempts nothing currently recognizable as art scholarship in approaching Joseph Cornell.

Many of the first writings on art permit themselves a creative element. Philostratus’ Imagines pretends to guide some “not exceedingly bright adolescents” through an art collection that Philostratus likely never saw, if it ever existed. Arthur Fairbanks in the Loeb introduction

---


276 Simic writes in a NYRB Blog entry titled “Dreams I’ve Had and Some I Haven’t”: “I was a poet and one who was told repeatedly that his poems gave the impression of having been lifted directly from dreams. When I objected and explained that they were solely the product of my imagination, people were not convinced.”

277 Mark Ford, “Playing with Today,” Nybooks.com, November 20, 2003, http://www.nybooks.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/articles/archives/2003/nov/20/playing-with-today/. Ford went on to write that Simic’s “laconic, bleached, often puzzling lyrics avoid pointing morals or extracting clear meanings from the scenes they enact; instead they skilfully create the illusion that they have just stumbled over or backed into bizarre juxtapositions that startle and unnerve—or at the very least invite the reader to pause for thought.”

explains how “the scene or scenes are described for the story they tell, and for the sentiment they express in this story.”

Vasari told the Lives of the Artists as narrative biographies, some of which content he altered or padded, for the purpose of explaining why Michelangelo’s efforts were the supreme example of artistic perfection. Vasari claimed that Michelangelo replied to a priest’s suggestion that he take a wife and produce children, by claiming that his works were his children; the tale works to prove the artist’s commitment to his art and therefore his greatness. Likewise, Simic provides tales, snapshots, postcards, tableaux that elaborate the experience of the art of Cornell’s boxes.

Rather than writing about Cornell at an objective remove, Simic’s Dime Store Alchemy offers brief texts “as lucid and as shadowy as the imagination it celebrates” according to The New Yorker. The contents of a Cornell box never point to an indubitably clear meaning, though their careful manufacturing indicates Cornell's thoughtful position of each object to make the enchanting whole—“passing the hours by changing the positions of a few items, setting them in new positions relative to one another in a box. At times the move is no more than a tenth of an inch.” A Cornell box is never about a ballerina, or a Medici son, or a beach hotel, though the titles allude to such images. Just as Cornell’s boxes defy easy categorization (are they collage? sculpture? miniature sets?), Simic’s book, despite its label as an art book, is not clearly identified. Work of art history? Fiction? Poetry? Prose Poetry? The page-long reflections are much like the artist’s boxes in refusing to offer a recognizably meaningful work of art. Simic’s

---


281 Simic, Dime-Store Alchemy, 44.
content expands beyond the traditional purview of artwriting, reiterates the whole problems surrounding genre identification, and invites us into genre-bending, to call them prose poems.282

The prose poem is a contentious genre, as its name reveals.283 Appearing like prose, its content makes use of many poetic operations so that the prose poem is diacritical as both verse and prose.284 Jakobson in “Two Aspects of Language” distinguishes prose as syntagmatic, therefore metonymic in tendency, whereas verse has a vertical orientation willing to substitute (or pile words “one of top of the other”) in its production of language, which is therefore paradigmatic and metaphoric. The prose poem is often understood as a subgenre to poetry, due to its brevity, rhythmic language, metaphorical language, and even its pictorial quality. This is sometimes explained as a natural extension of the short, scene-setting style of the poem, but is equally attributed to these early practitioners whose relationships with artists and thoughts on art permeate their manner and thus the works they produced.

---

282 The latest trend is to refute generic considerations. Steven Monte recommends considering genres as processes rather than classifications of traits because then the charges of indecipherability and indeterminacy for the prose poem is not so admonishing. Steven Monte, Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000, 30. Michel Delville concludes his book on the American prose poem to provide an “enormous variety in mode, tone, form, and subject matter” and therefore “not as a genre in itself but, rather, as a platform for various intergeneric negotiations, one which promotes a constant dialectical exchange,” Michel Delville, The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998, 243).

283 Poetry is focused on the form of the message of language; prose is concerned with the developing content. This distinction is theoretically admirable but rarely applicable without some difficulty. Many great prose writers are deeply concerned with the rhythm of their language. On the other side, much poetry is formed in relation to its content. Given both prose and verse presentations of the natural world (Darwin versus Lucretius), history (Herodotus’ Histories and The Bible), love, death, life, and every other topic under the sun, the only discernible difference between prose and poetry is probably enjambment.

284 The introduction to the entry on “verse and prose” in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics provides an admirable history of the terms with current scholarly considerations such as translations and collaborations, while the earlier entry of the First Edition (and its subsequent Enlarged Edition), written by Northrup Frye, opens with the statement that “Words are used for (1) for ordinary speech, (2) for discursive or logical thought, and (3) for literature” and then proceeds from there with examples, Roland Greene et al., eds., The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, Fourth Edition, 4th ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 885.
There is some dispute about the appearance of the first prose poems. Generally, however, Baudelaire’s *Spleen de Paris: petits poèmes en prose* takes pride of place. His introduction acknowledges a predecessor in Aloysius Bertrand whose *Gaspard de la nuit: fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et Callot*, clearly associates itself with artists. Baudelaire also aligns his work with visual arts, and David Scott’s *Pictorialist Poetics* admirably explains how aspects of painting’s aesthetics were incorporated into the formation of poems, specifically the prose poem.

By its use of rhyme, repetition, syntactical inversion, line length, typography, even the *blancs* between stanzas, the poem can reproduce in language the qualities and processes of painting (color harmony, juxtaposition of visual motifs, the relation of figure to back-ground, etc.), call attention to its own configuration as an image to be grasped, and thus set up a tension between its discursive, syntactic order and its visual, plastic one.

According to the research of Scott, the art and literary alliances of the 19th century encouraged writers to adopt visual features in their texts. Though typography would become significant for Mallarmé and for members of the early 20th century avant-garde, Scott shows how earlier prose poets used visual sources such as the Dutch painters to develop framing devices, creating windows onto brief scenes. He also notes how early prose poems were presented spatially like pictures in their brevity and squared, justified contours. The prose poem did not merely aim to be ekphrastic, as many of its writers were also art critics, but sought to merge the

---

285 Fabienne Moore argues for the prose poem reaching back to the Enlightenment with experiments to reform poetry. She opens *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment* with the Chevalier de Jaucourt’s 1765 definition for “poème en prose” in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, showing its existence and relevance before the usual date of the 19th century. In *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature*, Steven Monte suggests that the prose poem emerges in response to a change in aesthetics in the 19th century, where poetry shifts from focusing on external features, to the intensity of reader’s responses. Whichever century launched the prose poem, both believe it breaks with genre-specific controls in order to achieve a type of socio-political freedom through aesthetic means.

best aspects of art with revolutions in writing. Creative language makes use of both the form and the content of language to influence meaning, connecting disparate interpretations to produce new possibilities.

Poets make linguistic forms in measured, rhythmic language. These forms are capable of expressing embodied consciousness and can serve as objects of recognition between persons beyond the context of their creation. They thereby give us knowledge of somatic, emotional, and social conditions beyond whatever meanings their language conveys. Because these forms are made of our own natures, they give us knowledge how and not only knowledge of.287

One might consider then that Simic’s work on Joseph Cornell is a formidable and valiant application of the inherently creative element possible in writing on art. Paul Barolsky lauds Simic’s book for its “discussion so suggestive of what art is and does to us...Simic’s alchemical prose mimics the rhythms of art and stimulates the reader to approach art on artful terms.”288 Simic approaches art not simply from a historical perspective but one that is “artful,” introducing the possibility that art writing may use the cause-and-effect of reason, but also the associative pleasure of the imagination. The prose poem engages the tensions that Simic finds in Cornell’s boxes. Imaginative writings provide a liminal space where creative explorations associate and adopt, reject and limit, but do not convict what can be seen. The prose poem is itself not a definite form, and so seeks, but does not authorize the art to which it may respond. Prose poetry provides a particularly apt, alternative approach to writing on art because of its historical relationship to art and artists, but poems of all kinds, stories, and novels have also addressed and engaged works of art.

There are potentially far more ways of writing about art than they might realize, some of which have yet to be envisioned or invented...there are, of course, many

288 Paul Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” 400.
stories of art, some of which have yet to be told, and that all of these stories can be written with passion, clarity, and wit...What might well be restored to the study of art is the sheer delight of observing such play for its own sake, the joy of seeing the very play of the imagination, of finding suggestive but informed ways of describing the play of the artist’s fantasy...I dream of an art history that is learned, imaginative, sensible, theoretically sophisticated, well wrought, and thus worthy of the very art it celebrates.289

Simic compares Joseph Cornell and Emily Dickinson, finding “to read her poems, to look at his boxes, is to begin to think in a new way about American literature and art.”290

ILLEGIBLE FORCE

To do justice to Cornell’s boxes, these artifacts of Cornell’s imagination, Simic has explored the boxes and Cornell imaginatively, leaving us our imagination in relating to them in turn: “The far and beyond and the near momentarily touch. The world is beautiful but not sayable. That’s why we need art.”291 The world can be seen and it can be described, but only art provides that third metamorphosing image. The work of art transforms something present and familiar to the artist into some surprising new thing, with an existence beyond the artist’s keep. This “metamorphosis” can be understood as constantly challenging the self to transform into the unfamiliar.

Simic suggests that art, whether visually or poetically presented, allows us to connect with a way of being that cannot be bound by language, because it is not of logos, but adopts both philosophy and poetry, mind and eye. It is singular and relational, individual and communal. This

289 Paul Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” 400. Given Barolsky’s interest in wit, I was reminded of some historical considerations of wit from the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, Enlarged Edition: Aristotle in Rhetoric considered wit to be the ability to make apt comparisons; Hobbes wrote in Leviathan “Naturall Wit, consisteth principally in two things; Celerity of Imagining. (that is, swift succession of one thought to another;) and steddy direction to some approved end”; Hazlitt in “Wit and Humour” contrasted wit, which is artificial, with imagination, which is valid. If art writing is to develop wit, it may well need the imagination.
290 Simic, Dime-Store Alchemy, 75.
291 ibid., 56.
alternate, third thing is found through the imagination, which can only be described in narrative form. Kearney’s history of the imagination required that he “*narrate* the stories in this concept, to recount the history of how it came to be.” References to the definition of the imagination, from *Biographia Literaria*, rarely consider the story that produces it, which is unfortunate because that story has much to say about the labyrinthine efforts necessary to expound the imagination.  

The obscure definition for the primary imagination, the secondary imagination, and fantasy arrive as the conclusion to Chapter 13, which is subtitled “On the imagination, or esemplastic power.” Coleridge’s discussion of the imagination starts chapters earlier, but in Chapter 13 the argument unfolds. The chapter is presented in three parts: a philosophical argument, a letter filled with metaphors from a friend to the poet, and the final poetic definitions. Each are important to understanding how to read the final definitions. In Coleridge’s sly maneuverings, we discover that the imagination cannot be articulated point blank. Understanding the imagination produces a hermeneutic circle “where the term we are seeking to define can only be understood by means of the search itself.”

The Coleridge scholar Catherine Wallace in her book *The Design of Biographia Literaria* is wary of reflections on Coleridge’s writing style. She claims his writing is neither methodical

---

293 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. H. J Jackson (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 313: “The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.”
294 Coleridge first defined “esemplastic power” in Chapter 10 as “to shape into one,” Coleridge, *The Major Works*, 239. His interest in his term “esemplastic” aims to help shift the general, and unanalyzed, understanding of the term “imagination” that the reader may have. It also introduces how the imagination functions to relate disparate parts into a unity.
nor prudent, and so it cannot help analyses of his arguments. She does not consider the possibility that the form is a part of his rationale.

Prudent authors of difficult arguments take particular care with transitions. Their transitions integrate parts, subordinate parts to the whole, and repeatedly orient the reader within sequences of patterns large and small. Such transitions separate form from content by commenting on the form as such; this helps the reader to monitor his comprehension of the major structures. Coleridge’s’s argument is exceedingly difficult, but his transitions are hardly prudent. Often they are cryptic, just a sentence or two catapulting us into strange new terrain.

Coleridge’s transitions are blunt breaks. The chapter is split in three sections, which are not noted as such but distinctly different in tone and style; a strident Kantian tone shifts into a conversational letter filled with metaphors and analogies that the letter writer claims cannot be stated otherwise, to the final three definitions. The first section is ponderous and philosophical, in keeping with the work of the previous chapter in *Biographia Literaria*. The arrival of a friend’s letter, which the narrator includes in full, explains all that is wrong with the attempted treatise on the imagination. When the narrator accepts his friend’s judgment, and writes that “I

---


297 The first is a formal, almost frighteningly boring, seemingly intentionally off-putting, disquisition on Descartes and Kant’s aim to make the world intelligible. Coleridge discusses Kant’s introduction of negative qualities, swirling in abstractions, to present an argument wherein two opposing forces are not incompatible (logical conflict) or contradictory (nonsense problem) but bring forth a third force. These must be schematized in order to then allow “for us to elevate the thesis from notional to actual,” to posit it in a real context. This will permit an intuitive study of how they interpenetrate one another, and the resulting generations. How to study this “one power with its two inherent indestructible yet counteracting forces” will only become evident through proceeding towards the as yet unknown solution. He continues in his dense sentences to the point of saying that a third thing must be created of these two forces. This third thing (which he refers to by its Latin name for no clear reason, tertium aliquid) must be “the interpenetration of the counteracting powers, partaking of both” at which point this section is interrupted, never to be resumed.

298 The friend writes that this chapter on the imagination (which we are to understand we have just begun in the preceding section) was so utterly different from his expectations of our narrator that he was bewildered “as if I had been standing on my head.” The language is obscure when he is accustomed to the “light airy modern church” of their conversation as opposed to this gloomy cathedral filled with shadows. He “cannot better represent” his feelings than by such a metaphor. The friend offers three reasons for removing this chapter: 1) it is incomplete, “fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower”; 2) it does not fit into a book of poetry as it will be overly long, and therefore also increase the expense of the book for the poetry reader and buyer; 3) the chapter will cause the book to be too expensive and thus not sell. He explains that Coleridge has “done too much, and yet not enough,” and that this chapter belongs instead in the treatise on “the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and Deity,” which will be released at a future date. Coleridge, *The Major Works*, 311-2.
shall content myself for the present with stating the main result of this chapter,” the reader has been guided to accept the abandonment of the project as well.299 The abrupt transitions reinforce the appearance that one section is unrelated to the next and an overall meaning cannot be drawn through them. The narrator remains blameless for the reader’s confusion because the textual choices are commanded by some unknown friend.300 The full explanation of the imagination is eliminated,301 but its trace is left in both the philosophical introduction, which is revealed as a fictional chapter of a non-existent book, and in the letter, which is a fictional creation of Coleridge, not the product of a real friend of Coleridge. So we have a fictionalized letter telling us to eliminate an imaginary chapter from a mythical book, as the main body of a chapter on the imagination. There may not be clear transitions, but such disparate parts are precisely what the imagination brings together.302

The imagination is the process that connects cause and metaphor, knowledge and poetry, knowing and being, speaking and seeing, reason and intuitive science in Spinoza’s terms. To be tempted in opposing directions is to stand at the heart of this powerful force, one that cannot be

299 Coleridge, The Major Works, 313.
300 His friend is one whose judgment he “had ample reason to estimate and revere” so the second section cannot be merely dismissed as the thoughts of an impoverished mind (Coleridge BL 310). The letter concludes with the signature “your affectionate,” where it is important to remember the root of “affect” comes from the Latin verb afficere meaning to influence, ad [at, to] + facere [to do, to make]. The friend’s advice is practical and influential because it can work upon him within this material realm. This is additionally ironic since the friend and letter are a fictional creation of Coleridge.
301 He promises us that he will deliver it at a future date. The reader is left with an inconclusive argument, responsible for seeking its later resolution, and a series of definitions that without that discourse defy understanding. These definitions remain controversial among scholars.
302 Coleridge introduces this idea in Chapter 12, which outlines the principle of the esemplastic power, the faculty of which is the imagination, explains that it is “a chapter of requests and premonitions concerning the perusal or omission of the chapter that follows”; the list that follows includes a reminder that Chapter 13 should not be hacked away from the whole lest it seem “deformed and monstrous,” Coleridge, The Major Works, 280-1. Chapter 12 continues then to state that the principle of the imagination is not a product but must be its own predicate. Retrospectively then, the imagination is falsely explained in the philosophical section since it cannot be a cause, but must be its own being. In contrast, the second section predicates the imagination for its discussion. The third section with its definitions can then present the imagination as both predicate and product, “a truth self-grounded, unconditional and known by its own light,” because it has been stated as such, with all the attempts to explicate in theory removed, though the text retains their actual trace, Coleridge, The Major Works, 296.
written down or understood simply as *logos*, nor be accepted entirely in the prescience of poetry, and so it remains “an illegible force,” just as Charles Simic said. The tripartite quality of the imagination, enunciated by Coleridge, is rekindled by Simic in “The Gaze We Knew As a Child” where he states that there are three kinds of images. The first are those “seen with eyes open in the manner of realists” and the second are “images we see with eyes closed.” Simic, *Dime Store Alchemy*, 62. The third kind, however, are a merging.

They partake of both dream and reality, and of something else that doesn’t have a name. They tempt the viewer in two opposite directions. One is to look and admire the elegance and other visual properties of the composition, and the other is to make up stories about what one sees. In Cornell’s art, the eye and the tongue are at cross purposes. Neither one by itself is sufficient. It’s that mingling of the two that makes up the third image.

The images of Cornell’s art are the point in the labyrinth where the real and the imagined, the communicable and the incommunicable are no longer contradictions, where the “far and beyond and the near momentarily touch.” Simic, *Dime Store Alchemy*, 62. The eye and the tongue find different forms, fragments of the whole, united by the art of our imagination. As Coleridge’s text indicated, the whole is incomprehensible, pieced together from fragments found. Simic likewise states: “We are fragments of an unutterable whole. Meaning is always in search of itself. Unsuspected revelations await us around the next corner.” Stagnant absorption is not an option so long as we turn down new avenues. Revelations can only come with revolutions of our expectations, altering our expectations of what we can see, how we may describe, and what we will know of

304 ibid., 62.
305 ibid., 62.
306 ibid., 72.
the world surrounding us. Cornell’s vision is not ours, nor can Simic’s be, because we are
“invited to imagine our own.”307

Art and reality do not collapse into one another, but offer different branches on which the imagination can rest. If the imagination could be set loose on our art and theory, what might we suddenly see to say? The bird, last seen riding down Sixth Avenue, returns at the end of *Dime Store Alchemy* in a final ekphrasis about *Deserted Perch*, 1949. In Cornell’s box, there is a green parakeet perched on a stick that projects out of a faded “poster” for The Hotel Eden. Paradise. And, by association, Utopia Parkway, where Cornell’s works were created and he died. Still reading, we too are perched on the imaginative reaches of Simic and Cornell, but with the conclusion of *Dime Store Alchemy*, we desert their idylls, unless our own imagination takes flight.

---

Shall I say it is the constancy of persian red
that permits me to see
this persian red bird
come to sit now
on the brick barbecue
within my windowframe.

—from “For Mark Rothko” by Jorie Graham
CHAPTER III.1

PRAUT’S PROVOCATION: VERMEER, SWANN, AND THE READER

I don’t mean to say that my survival depends upon the artistic rendering; I mean that my one chance for happiness depends on wind and strange loyalty and a little bark, which I think about and watch and agonize over day and night, like a worried spirit waiting for love.

-from “Hanging Scroll” by Gerald Stern

“Swann in Love” is the most commonly read section from the first volume of Proust’s classic modernist work *A la recherche du temps perdu* (known variably as *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past*), as it exemplifies many of the themes expanded upon in the larger work. Swann’s story steps back before the life of Marcel, who is otherwise the narrator of the novel. Historical markers situate the story during La Belle Epoque (circa 1871-1914), during Swann’s love affair with Odette, likely begun in the late 1870s. Swann has already been introduced, in the first part, as a character in the young Marcel’s life, the visitor capable of upsetting the family routine, responsible for depriving Marcel of the infamous bedtime kiss the boy yearns to receive from his mother in the novel’s opening.

---

Swann represents the sophisticated connoisseur, eloquent about antiques and works of great cultural interest, but also a man-about-town, flitting his time as a dilettante. One profound example of his ungrounded nature is seen in Swann’s desire to write a small book on the Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer, of Delft. Odette asks Swann if Vermeer is still alive (lacking the same information that Marcel’s lover Albertine will want in *The Captive*, IV:289), and whether she might “see any of his things in Paris” but becomes distracted when Swann describes “what artistic beauty consisted in.”

*His lengthy replies are too abstract for her rudimentary regard. Swann “presents facts about works of art because he cannot be bothered to communicate the feelings they awaken.”* His intellectual interest in art is not based in a passion to produce and share his work, a characteristic in stark contrast to the creative endeavors lauded throughout the novel. While visiting one afternoon as Swann is working, Odette asks about Vermeer’s love life, but she becomes disappointed and bored when there is no gossip to fan her interest since little is known of the artist’s life.

Vermeer is famous now for his use of light in quiet indoor scenes, but was just gaining interest when Proust was writing. The first volume, begun in 1909 (though an earlier novella *Jean Santeuil* establishes elements that would reappear in the novel), was published in 1913. In the time period that Proust loosely posits Swann’s affair with Odette, Vermeer was hardly known, at best a secondary Dutch master. Odette’s questions make her ridiculous for Proust’s contemporary readers but in her narrative time her questions make sense. That she is indifferent

---

to the answers reveals her superficial interest in art, even regarding the artist her lover holds dear. She displays an intellectually crude character, with a shallow sensibility.

When Swann determines that indeed Odette does not love him, he returns to his studies on the painter, debating whether to pursue a research trip that might authenticate his suspicions regarding one painting in particular.

He was convinced that a picture of “Diana and her companions” which had been acquired by the Mauritshuis at the Goldschmidt sale as a Nicolas Maes was in reality a Vermeer. And he would have liked to be able to examine the picture on the spot, in order to buttress his convictions.\textsuperscript{312}

Swann’s plans for such a trip are impeded by the nature of their love affair. As their relationship progresses, neither is satisfied by the other, but it continues because Odette desires his financial resources, and he becomes jealous of her attentions. He stays in Paris, fearing Odette will find another lover during his absence. In one poignant line—“He would have been glad to learn that she was leaving Paris for ever; he would have had the heart to remain there; but he hadn't the heart to go”—Swann reveals both the end of his Vermeer studies and the death of the love that will continue in jealousy and then marital indifference.\textsuperscript{313} He renounces art for a woman, hoping thereby to possess beauty rather than admire it with appreciative disinterest, which Proust develops across the novel as the correct aesthetic sensibility. The irony of Swann’s abandoning this painting of Diana, a symbol of chastity, in order to obsess over his love is made all the more acute in discovering that Proust has granted historical accuracy to Swann’s suspicion.

In 1876, \textit{Diana and Her Companions} was auctioned as a work by Nicolas Maes and purchased by the Mauritshuit in The Hague, where it has remained ever since.\textsuperscript{314} When Swann

\textsuperscript{314} P.T.A. Swillens, \textit{Johannes Vermeer, Painter of Delft, 1632-1675} (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950), 158.
says that he would like to “buttress his convictions” that it might be a Vermeer, he is showing his enormous potential as an art historian. He has an intuition and eye that perceives what others ignore. In 1883, the painting was catalogued as “perhaps by Johannes Vermeer” then again attributed to Nicolaes Maes, then to Jan Vermeer van Utrecht, also a Dutch Golden Age painter but of no known relation. The painting would not be attributed to Vermeer until 1901 when Abraham Bredius and Willem Martin of the Mauritshuit noticed its coloring and technical similarities to *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, which was then attributed to Vermeer, and has since been questioned by its present owners at the Scottish National Gallery.\(^{315}\) *Diana and Her Companions*, however, has never since been doubted as the work of Vermeer, with additional proofs found to guarantee its authenticity. Swann’s suspicions were correct; he could have collaborated in Vermeer’s revival.

The Vermeer painting is also a poignant choice for Swann. *Diana and her Companions* is a remarkably chaste painting, given its mythic tale and other Diana paintings. Usually, the scene shows the women returned from a hunt, undressing for their bath. In Vermeer’s rendition, the contemplative, for which he would become so well known, cools the scene. Diana is turned partly away from the viewer, fully dressed as are all the other figures. None of the figures seem to be preparing to disrobe. The women, who will spark Acteon’s desire and make Diana turn him into a stag to be torn apart by his own hunting dogs, have not unveiled themselves. The desire that leads to death has not yet occurred, as it has not yet for Swann with Odette, but is in this instance launched. Knowledge of the story is presupposed in viewer and in Proust’s analytic reader.\(^{316}\) Arthur Wheelock, in his study of Vermeer’s works, notices that Vermeer provided only


a crescent moon to symbolize Diana as the goddess of the night, a role associated with death. Swann’s aesthetic death has none of the violence of Acteon’s, but desire makes him gaze in the wrong direction and he forfeits life for that decision.

Ovid also tells another story in his *Metamorphoses* of Diana, one far more specifically about her companions than the tale of Acteon. In Book II, Diana’s chaste maiden Callisto is raped by Jupiter, and becomes thereby pregnant.317 She hides her “shame,” until they are all disrobing to bathe, many months later, whereupon her condition is revealed. Diana is outraged at Callisto’s betrayal (despite the woman’s unwilling participation in the act) and bans the young woman from her divine company. Walter Liedtke, who organized the Metropolitan Museum of Art show “Vermeer and the Delft School” in 2001, claimed that *Diana and her Companions* is about this myth, and not the later tale with Acteon.318 A cleaning of the painting in 1999 allowed a figure in the right background to become more prominent, whom he identifies as Callisto “with downcast eyes,” quoting Ovid. Contrasting this figure to the young woman showing her loyalty by washing Diana’s feet, a traditional symbol of fidelity, heightens the drama of the moment to come when Callisto’s downcast eyes will look up to see that she has been outcast.

Such an interpretation returns to Swann’s abandonment of a chaste intellectual life, alongside Diana, to reveal his pregnant, though unwilled, desire for Odette. Alternatively, given Odette’s disinterest in Swann’s work, she becomes Diana. In the Platonic tradition, the thinker is pregnant with thought, which Socrates, or the philosopher, must help to deliver. If Swann keeps his budding interest in Vermeer, he would be spurned by Odette, who, like Diana, demands

317 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, TK.
exclusive participation in her world. In any of these ways, Vermeer’s *Diana and her Companions* is a poignant selection for Proust to offer Swann, for Swann to reject.

Vermeer’s works exemplify the significance of the visual imagination, one of the major motifs in Proust’s novel. The impressions of life are layered in memory and produce an aesthetic experience of the world. Such a stylized and impressionistic relation to life is reiterated by many of the novel’s artists, one of the most significant being Bergotte, an author who encourages Marcel to write and through whose books the young man begins to perceive beauty. Bergotte admired Vermeer, “adored and imagined he knew by heart” *View from Delft*. Many years into the narrative and decades after Swann’s abandonment of the subject, Bergotte attends an exhibit of Vermeer’s works. His familiarity with the paintings does not recall a little patch of yellow in *View from Delft* that one critic described as “of a beauty that was sufficient in itself” and he determines that he must see it for himself. Bergotte “had ceased to go out of doors...was smothered in shawls and rugs” and has been put on bed rest from an attack of uraemia, but he must confirm the critic’s comments about a painter he adores. Staring at the painting in the gallery, Bergotte realizes how much he wished his own writing had the vibrancy and beauty of the little patch of yellow. The revelation produces a final stroke. Vermeer’s art provides the transcendent moment in life that allows the rest to sink into eternity, “like the patch of yellow wall painted with so much skill and refinement by an artist destined to be for ever unknown and barely identified under the name Vermeer.” The transcendent experience can be wrought by works whose greatness remains unrecognized.

---

321 ibid., 244.
322 ibid., 240, 244.
323 ibid., 245.
Proust transposed this scene from his own experience appreciating Vermeer, before the show that would mark his return to fame. In 1921, an exhibit of Vermeer’s works was on display at the Jeu de Paume, attracting attention and reviews. Proust seldom left his cork-lined room, wrapped in covers to subdue his permanent chill. For the second volume, *Within a Budding Grove*, he won the Prix Goncourt in 1919, bringing fame to his still unfinished novel, which future volumes he continued to write and edit at length through insomniac nights. Exhibition reviews by Leon Daudet and Jean-Louis Vaudoyer convinced him, however, to attend. On the morning he planned to see the show, he experienced a giddy spell that left him dizzy and shaking. Nevertheless, inspired by the critic’s passion for Vermeer’s work, Proust attended the gallery to see *View from Delft*. Proust claimed to be much revived by the sight of the Vermeers and continued on to the Ingres exhibit, then to lunch at the Ritz before returning home, which activities likely exhausted him. The last known photograph of Proust is taken outside the Vermeer exhibit in May, 1921. He would never leave his home again and died from pneumonia on November 18, 1922.

Much effort has been made by various scholars to identify this patch of yellow. Alfred Corn describes first seeing *View of Delft* in “Seeing all the Vermeers,” explaining “Proust’s ‘patch of yellow wall’ I couldn’t find, though”—until years later.

a *View of Delft*, cleaned so thoroughly
you couldn’t miss that patch of yellow—*not* a wall,
Proust got it wrong, instead, a roof... Sheltering involuntary
memories of countless choked-up viewers,
whose gazes added one more laminate of homage

---

325 Alexander, *Marcel Proust’s Search for Lost Time*, 351.
Corn speaks to the importance of the scene not only for the character Bergotte, but through the signifying power of that story to so many of Proust’s readers. The reader/viewer’s desire to identify the yellow patch, however, may be a misreading of a Proustian trick.

Reading becomes dangerous when, instead of awakening us to an individual inner life, it takes its place: when truth no longer seems to us an ideal we can realise only by the intimate progression of our thoughts and the efforts of our heart, but instead starts to seem like a material thing deposited in the pages of books.326

Proust goes on to describe the satisfaction that such readers find in seeking out the object of truth in far away libraries, or analogously a painting in distant museum. He provides the example of a scholar who is ensconced in a convent in Ultrechtt having learned of some truth contained in a book, or letter, or page of manuscript, and so quietly reviewing the materials among the nuns who still wore the white mantels like those in Van der Weyden paintings. Proust then explains in a footnote that this convent, of course, does not exist. He transformed a story about the French thinker and critic Sainte-Beuve, who steadfastly went to a closed convent where he had heard they had information useful to him. Proust describes the library in inordinate detail but admits in the footnote that he had never in fact visited it, though all the details of the trip are “based on real impressions.”327 The canal that he saw in Delft served for Sainte-Beuve’s fictional journey to Utrecht. While visiting the Hotel de Bon Dieu, he saw the Van der Weyden paintings in the chapel, none of which include nuns, but which he saw in other Dutch paintings on that trip through Dutch country. He chooses “to fuse these several beauties together into one to make the example more striking for the reader.”328 As Proust displays in his metamorphosis of these various moments, truth is not revealed is one factually recounted moment, but rather in the

---

327 ibid., 29.
328 ibid., 22.
way that actual experiences are configured to express the impression of the moment. Therein lies the truth that Bergotte witnessed, that Corn and other scholars seek, that Swann abandoned.

Given Bergotte's enlightenment and Proust's passion for the painter, Swann's obsession with Odette rather than the likely Vermeer painting shows his failure to see true beauty, to understand how "this life that we live in half darkness can be illuminated." Art transforms life, allows the mundane to be metamorphosed into a kaleidoscopic experience of memorable being, as Marcel discovers in Time Regained. Swann might have been that influential critic who could change a life, offering one last vision of truth to a dying man. Instead Swann "dies frustrated and unrealized," never having overcome as Marcel does the "excess of tortured sensibility and intellectuality." Swann is fixed in an empty love that only reinforces his own superficial tendencies. His efforts are easily distracted by social calls and jealous love, but equally by his own lazy engagement with life.

Noticing that Diana and her Companions was likely by Vermeer displays his visual acuity and sensitivity to the things of the world. Since he abandons his vital research, he never learns as Marcel does "what richness, what variety, is hidden unbeknownst to us within that great unpeneetrated and disheartening darkness of our soul which we take for emptiness and nothingness." Swann wastes his life in a half-hearted love affair instead of visiting and pursuing Vermeer's work. The brief mention of Diana and her Companions unfurls Swann's whole disappointing life. Swann becomes doubly tragic; not only is he an acknowledged dilettante in "Swann in Love" but he remains one, when he needn't have been one, having all the

---

discernment necessary for greatness. If Proust is correct that “our wisdom begins where the author’s ends” then Proust’s mention of *Diana and her Companions*, or any place the reader feels compelled to pause, also initiates a series of reflections that revolve around the reader’s willingness to pursue “what for the author may be called *Conclusions*, but for the reader, *Provocations*.”

Life can be transformed by the detail you see, and to which you attend.

---

332 Marcel Proust and John Ruskin, *On Reading*, 23.
CHAPTER III.2
WAYS OF SEEING WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS’ “PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL”

Unaware he’d draw you here,
my master, in a sense, paints you
in too, essential to the scene,
the painting, so its word suggests,
still going on.

—from *Recoveries* by Theodore Weiss

William Carlos Williams wrote a series of poems in response to paintings by the 16th Century artist Brueghel. The ten poems of “Pictures from Brueghel” were first published in the Spring 1960 issue of *The Hudson Review*, and then rearranged, with one of them altered, for his next and final book of poetry. Published just after he died in March 1966, *Pictures from Brueghel and other poems* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry two months later. The book, which includes his 1955 collection *The Desert Music* and 1957 collection *Journey to Love*, opens with the ten-part poem that constitutes the titular work. The pictures are neither models nor parallels but rather “occasions for Williams’ creative activity, and as such they propel the poet towards a consideration of the role of artist and audience in the generation and perception of the art.”

Assorted literary studies reveal how much these poems lead their readers to the art, but also how much thoughtful activity they generate as readers become viewers, navigating the space of both. Regarding “Hunters in the Snow,” Wendy Steiner wrote that it was “certainly the most

---

333 Brueghel is grouped with Dutch or Flemish painters, because the town of his birth was then a part of the Netherlands and is now part of Belgium.
As the work of art is a catalyst for Williams, so do his poems become catalysts for a dynamic engagement with the paintings. The first studies done on Williams’ relation to art by Bram Dijikstra and William Marling focused on the influence of various painters in his life. The work of Joel Conarroe and John Dixon Hunt pioneered the work relating the poems and paintings in the 1970’s. The 1980’s saw a number of critics—including Mary Ann Caws, Marjorie Perloff, Henry M. Sayre, and Wendy Steiner—examining the poems as verbal icons, “theorizing a system of structural correspondences between poem and picture, and attending carefully to the syntactical complexity of the poems.”

The new historicism of the 1990’s led to the work by Stephen Behrendt, James A.W. Heffernan, and Grant F. Scott, who studied how the poems shape what is seen by shifting the focus “away from the visual text and onto the process of perceiving and recreating the pictures.”

In these scholars, but surely the occasional common reader as well, a curiosity about the pictures is sparked. What do they look like? Is Williams right, in “Corn Harvest,” to say that “the painting is organized/ about a young // reaper enjoying his/ noonday rest”? How else to decide if “the inn-sign/ hanging from a/ broken hinge is a stag a crucifix,” except to look at The Hunters in the Snow? And once having looked, how to take him seriously that The Parable of the Blind is “without a red/ in the composition” when there are clearly several reds in the painting? Who is Brueghel “the painter” who is “unused to manual labor” and has “no time for any/ thing but his painting” as Williams claimed of the artist in “Self-Portrait”?

---

337 Scott, “Copied with a Difference,” 64.
These questions, and many others, occur in the space between the poems and the painting, when the reader/viewer holds each in hand and mentally jogs between the two trying to make sense of their relationship. The uncertainty of whether what has been read is an accurate rendering of the picture inspires the curiosity that takes the reader from the page to the picture to become a viewer. The uncertainty of what to think in comparing the two is stressful but is what propels further study, as Caws admirably explains in her book *The Art of Interference*. The poems then may be a way of encouraging the reader to become a viewer too, and from the inevitable confusion when those two things meet to become a more curious person.

Reading the Artist: Biography in “Self Portrait”

The first poem in the series “Pictures from Brueghel” is titled “Self-Portrait,” which immediately raises the question whether the poem is about Williams or truly just representing the portrait painting. The title of the poem series and the first poem “affirm the primacy of the artist and his authorship.” The poem describes the man “In a red winter hat blue/ eyes smiling/ just the head and shoulders” on the canvas. The sitter is crammed into the canvas with only his folded arms visible beneath his face. One big, right ear is showing beneath his hat. Only in the fourth stanza is there a leap back to the face, from a description of his coat to his “bulbous nose.”

Williams describes the portrait with care, as much a word painting as could be expected, shifting into interpretation by using the conjunction “but” in two locations: “but the eyes red-rimmed// from over-use” where he highlights the red around the eyes to suggest exhaustion from

---

338 See note 5 in the Introduction.
work. The area around the eyes is indeed painted reddish, but to claim that effect comes from over-work produces the personality and life story of the artist. Likewise, Williams’ claim that the wrists reveal that the sitter did not do “manual” labor is another such leap, and one that is particularly strange since painting is a manual effort.

but the delicate wrists

show him to have been a man unused to manual labor

Williams' interpretation reveals the modern notion that art is not labor intensive but a rarified experience, whereas art was once more closely associated with craft and labor through the guilds. An artist holds a paintbrush and palette knife in hand, twisting the wrist to achieve delicate flickers of paint. Only in the last stanza is the portrait sitter declared a painter, “no time for any-/thing but his painting.” The artist is too dedicated to his art. His beard remains unshaven.

Though Williams engages through the second half of the poem in a certain amount of interpretive work, the poem identifies as a representation of the painting by taking the title of the painting. The painting is claimed as a picture of Brueghel, a painter of renown about whom little is known. Neither his date nor location of birth is certain, though estimates range between 1510 and 1530, around the town of Brugel in the Netherlands, now Belgium. Even as he moved away from the purely comical depictions of his earlier drawings and began setting his

---

341 Emile Michel and Victoria Charles, The Brueghels (New York: Parkstone International, 2012), 79. Scholars vary in the spelling of Brueghel the Elder’s name. Some historians write Breugel with an ‘eu’ in the place of ‘ue,’ though René Van Bastelaer notes that Pieter Bruegel the Elder always signed his name with the ‘e’ after the ‘u’. Others have written his name as Breughel, inserting an ‘h’ after the ‘eu.’ The paintings from his first eight years as a master are signed Brueghel, but starting in 1559 he consistently signed Bruegel without an ‘h,’ though his two sons Pieter the Younger and Jan would keep the earlier spelling, Brueghel, which is what Williams used.

342 Most claim his birth to be between 1525-1530.
allegories and humorous scenes within a natural landscape that marks the realism of his later years, the art historians Emile Michel and Victoria Charles note that “his humorous side was one of the facets characteristic of his peasant origins.”

Brueghel remained connected to the countryside from which he came even as he developed his career in the city. He regularly joined small village festivities, attended weddings, celebrations, occasionally penciling a sketch, for the work he would later produce in his urban studio. Historians suggest Brueghel was always more comfortable in these village scenes rather than the bustling business of the big town. These traits are used to explain Williams’ affinity for the painter. Though Williams joined the art and poetry events of New York City, he remained entrenched in his Rutherford, New Jersey life, as busy as the local doctor. If Brueghel can be described as having a “strong literary-illustrative element in his work” then the natural sympathy between the two artists becomes emphasized. Williams, known for his perceptive descriptions and vigorous imagery, seems to remain close to the pictures themselves. Williams’ poems refer continuously to the visual content of the paintings, tying the text to the visual, even as he selects which aspects of the paintings to address.

The editor of The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume II, 1939-1962, Christopher MacGowan includes an endnote to “Self Portrait,” which explains that Williams and his wife saw some of the paintings described as pictures from Brueghel, including “Self-

---

343 Michel and Charles, Brueghels, 146.
344 Joel Conarroe, “The Measured Dance: Williams’ ‘Pictures from Brueghel,’” Journal of Modern Literature 1 (1971): 567. One of the first biographers of Brueghel, Carel van Mander wrote in 1604 that the painter would attend these celebrations “observing the droll behavior of the peasants, how they ate, drank, danced, capered, or made love” and from this anecdote does Brueghel’s realism stem. Joel Conarroe quotes Fritz Grossman’s uncertainty about this theory in The Paintings of Brueghel. Grossman imagines that this story might have been used to enhance Brueghel’s reputation by connecting him to the Italian masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci who advised artists to observe real life, real people in all their attitudes.
345 Conarroe, “Measured Dance,” 566.
Portrait,” when visiting the Kunsthistorische Museum on a 1924 trip to Vienna.\(^{346}\) That painting had been discovered in 1882 and some scholars at that time ascribed it to Brueghel, which remained its label at the Kunsthistorische when the Williamses visited, though critical work was already doubting the validity of this ascription.

An engraving by Dominicus Lampsonius, confirmed as depicting Brueghel, shows the artist as having a “curly, rather elegant beard, a full mustache, and a strong, slightly aquiline nose.”\(^{347}\) That man is well-appointed, and not the aged man of the painting, who is well past his forties, the age when most believe Brueghel died. Williams describes the portrait sitter with “a bulbous nose” not at all the aquiline dignity of the engraving. By 1928, the Kunsthistorische museum catalog no longer included the work under Brueghel’s name.\(^{348}\) A 1938 collection of Brueghel’s work—with a surprising introductory essay by Aldous Huxley—did however include a reproduction of the painting with the title \textit{The Old Shepherd}, which is the complete title (“Self-Portrait: The Old Shepherd”) given the poem's first publication in \textit{The Hudson Review}.\(^{349}\) In the 1950s, when Williams was likely writing this poem, the painting was ascribed to Van Eyck. The painting is now considered to be a 15th century portrait of a court jester Gonella who lived in Ferrara at the court of Niccolo III d’Este and is currently ascribed to Jean Fouquet.\(^{350}\)

The picture has thus revealed a great many artists and so none of them. In this fluidity, the self-portrait takes on added dimensions and possibilities. Whether Williams believed the self-portrait to specify Brueghel, the work of art suited his purposes of discussing what an artist looks

\(^{348}\) Williams, \textit{Collected Poems 2}, 504.
like, someone with “no time for any-/thing” but their art. The painting need not be simply a visual imitation of the specific Dutch artist, but can be understood in Williams’ poem as a rendition of the affect of the artist. Like the heavy work of a shepherd, the artist works tirelessly tending to his art. The portrait’s reflection of what it means to be an artist leads many to find Williams in this poem and thus to understand the poem also as a self-reflection.351

Whether a painter or a poet, the work of self-reflection is a part of the artistic process. Behrendt notes that all the poems have a “self-reflecting and even self-contemplating nature.”352 The work that looking at oneself as the self-portrait presents, however, is of looking outward to another. The viewer of the picture sees a man looking back. The outward gaze is reflected and reflective. Williams places this poem first, introducing us to the artist’s experience producing art but then states that for the artist the most important thing is the painting, not the life of the painter. In an earlier poem, “The Portrait of the Lady,” Williams wrote “what/ sort of man was Fragonard?/—as if that answered anything” and returns to his observations on the painting.353 The work is made primary. Now, the reader-viewer can turn with rapt attention to the work itself.

Ekphrastic Grammar for “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”

Perhaps the poem can be read without reference to the painter, but Williams opens the second poem in the sequence by leading the reader to the artist: “According to Brueghel.” Williams is focused in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” on representing Brueghel's painting,
and calls us to adopt a similar approach to his work.\textsuperscript{354} As Brueghel’s paintwork renders the subject matter of the painting, so does Williams’ language reflect his insights on the work of art.

The majority of the Brueghel painting by that name shows that “a farmer was ploughing/his field.” Brueghel’s depiction of a ploughman is evocative of Ovid's account in which he mentions “a peasant bent over his plough handle.”\textsuperscript{355} Scholars remain uncertain what and how much Brueghel read, but it is not unlikely that he could have read Ovid for himself.\textsuperscript{356} If the artist did read Ovid, he chose to alter the story of Daedelus and Icarus’ flight, among other ways by having the flight and fall remain unnoticed by the farmer.\textsuperscript{357} Where the tale recounts Daedelus looking anxiously back towards his son, Brueghel removes the paternal figure in this painting and leaves the son dumped upside down in the water.\textsuperscript{358} Only a seeking eye will notice the two little legs sticking out of the water in the lower right hand quadrant of the painting. The pathos of Icarus’ fall seems minimized, even ridiculed, by merely showing Icarus’ small legs.

Part of the attraction of the painting and the poem is the compositional juxtaposition between the foregrounded natural life—“the whole pageantry// of the year”—and the minimized Icarus. Without the story mentioned in the title, the painting can be about a farmer ploughing his field. Thomas McEvilley lists “content arising from verbal supplements supplied by the artist” as the second of his thirteen ways that content is construed in a picture.\textsuperscript{359}

\textsuperscript{354} Williams, \textit{Pictures from Brueghel}, 4.
\textsuperscript{356} The first version of the story can be found in pseudo-Apollodorus, but the better known version is found in Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}. In her introduction to Ovid, Mary M. Innes shares that translations “into more or less allegorized versions were produced in great numbers and in various languages—there are sixteenth century versions in English, German, Italian, Spanish and French.” Ovid, \textit{Metamorphoses}, 22.
\textsuperscript{357} Ovid, \textit{Metamorphoses}, 185. Ovid states that perhaps “a peasant bent over his plough handle caught sight of them as they flew past and stood stock still in astonishment, believing that these creatures who could fly must be gods”\textsuperscript{358} The British Museum owns an engraving by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Daedalus and Icarus or Marine Landscape with the Fall of Icarus that shows both Daedalus and Icarus still in the sky. Brueghel’s decision to remove Daedelus from the painting would seem to confirm the artist’s interpretive options, which I am underlining.
poem, the story is necessary to begin to make sense of the work, or appreciate why the work is
structured as it is. The title reminds the viewer of the story and makes sense of the small legs in
the water.

Verbal narrative is dependent on such references but is also developed through syntax, as
extensively diagnosed in Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*. Williams’ sentence structure in
“Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” confirms his allegiance to Brueghel’s version of the story. As
Brueghel foregrounds the rest of reality while Icarus drowns, so does Williams grammatically
minimize Icarus in the first stanza:

```plaintext
According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring
```
This construction relegates Icarus to an adverb clause with time, “when Icarus fell.” The
sentence expands out of an indefinite pronoun subject: “it” in “it was spring.” The season loops
from object to subject. Icarus is not the grammatical subject of this sentence, nor the subject of
the painting at a glance. Icarus is, in both instances, an oblique subject.

The last stanza concludes by diminishing Icarus again:

```plaintext
a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning.
```
Here, Icarus is subordinated to an indefinite pronoun structure, where the subject is
nature, a splash, and Icarus not subject-worthy. At the beginning and in the end, Icarus is
undermined by indefinite pronoun sentence constructions. “According to Brueghel” do
we approach the painting, letting his title guide us to the small legs in the water, only then

---

to wonder why Icarus should be so minimized. The contrast in stature between man and nature is considerable, and yet content points to that which is smallest. Williams reiterates this motion through his language. If the beginning and end are points of emphasis in a poem, Icarus remains highlighted because the first and last stanza discuss him. On the other hand, he is not the agent of any action. Icarus both is and is not the subject of the painting and poem. In focusing on Williams’ artwork, the reader is drawn to consider the painter, who leads the reader to view the painting, and from there to return to the poem. The reader cycles through the elements that participate in an ekphrastic work. But one more remains.

Reading the Reader: Identity in “Peasant Wedding”

Stephen Behrendt maintains that Williams’ poems address “the joint activity of the poet and reader—artist and audience” and thus reveal that the poems “are ‘about’ us as much as (perhaps even more than) themselves.”\footnote{Behrendt, “Community Relations,” 32.} In “Peasant Wedding” the narrator addresses the reader by using a second person singular that also identifies the reader as one of the characters of the painting, the bridegroom.\footnote{Williams, \textit{Pictures from Brueghel}, 7.} The poem opens with these lines:

\begin{quote}
Pour the wine bridegroom
where before you the bride is enthroned.
\end{quote}

The second person addressed in the poem is the bridegroom, but also \textit{de facto} the reader. The reader and bridegroom become identified as one, through the imperative instruction, “Pour the wine bridegroom” in the first line of the poem. The groom must work; his title declares that
by being both a verb and the name for a workman who must tend to animals or person. The
imperative that requires the groom to act also indicates that the groom is in service to the bride.
This groom is specifically a “bridegroom” and as such is tethered to the bride.363

The groom/reader is commanded to pour wine simply because the bride is “before you”
and though she is “awkwardly silent simple” demurely sitting with her “hands folded in her/lap”
her presence requires offices of him. The bride of Williams poem may be mute but she is
“enthroned,” a silent yet commanding royal figure.364 The bride's very presence is a prescriptive
speech act that others must honor. As a groom is engaged to the bride, a reader is to the text, and
both must honor their raison d'être.

The reader, who has been addressed as the bridegroom, must toast—“pour the wine”—for
the work of art. The reader is thus made masculine. The act of pouring the wine can be
interpreted as a performative speech act, honoring and acknowledging the bride. The reader has
engaged the text, and is thus a bridegroom to the poem’s honored bride. This is the traditional
gendered split of painting as mute poem, and poem as spoken painting, where the silent object is
given voice in the poem. The bride for the reader is the text, but as readers we also speak, and
embody, the ekphrastic text that commends the painting, lauding its silent beauties. The poem,
which is the reader’s bride, is also a groom to the bride-painting. The ekphrastic poem can be
interpreted as both silent for the reader and outspoken for the painting; it is both bride and
groom. The text is the reader’s bride, silent and awkward, unable to respond—as Socrates
complained of all written representations in Plato’s dialogue Phaedrus—which makes poem and
painting mute, “ut pictoria poesis.” “Peasant Wedding” is an ekphrastic poem that pivots on the

363 His existence refers to hers, a signifier for her, which many brides and grooms bemoan in the planning process
and subsequent celebrations of the wedding day, which seems centered on the bride.
364 Alice Goldfarb Marquis, Marcel Duchamp: The Bachelor Stripped Bare (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 170.
gendered bias, refusing to settle, keeping the reader-viewer active. As reader-viewers we participate by thinking, looking, and interpreting. Duchamp wrote in “The Creative Act” that the “creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”

As readers we must participate through our libations.

William Marling in *William Carlos Williams and the Painters, 1909-1923* credits Duchamp as provoking a major shift in Williams through their mutual acquaintance with the Arensbergs.

Duchamp’s suggestions to Arensberg that the retinal ought to indicate an intellectual and imaginative world beyond the work of art became the source of many conversations between Williams and Walter Arensberg who met on occasion for a quiet lunch.

Williams may be playing with the idea of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même)*, which Duchamp promised to the Arensbergs (who sold it to Katherine Dreier who bequeathed it to the Philadelphia Museum of Art). Alice Goldfarb Marquis in *Marcel Duchamp: The Bachelor Stripped Bare* writes: “Thus it is the Bride who controls the far more complex, but far less autonomous, Bachelor Apparatus. ‘The Bride has a life center,’ Duchamp noted. ‘The Bachelors have not.’ At the Bride's command, the Bachelors’ desire is activated.”

 Likewise, we note the bride’s centrality in this poem by Williams, though

---

366 William Marling, *William Carlos Williams and the Painters, 1909-1923* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), 47-54. The Arensbergs had collected Duchamp’s work and opened their home to him when he arrived in June 1915 from war-torn Europe, a favor he repaid by introducing transformational works onto the walls of their New York City living room, where they hosted a weekly salon to discuss the new ideas coming over from Europe. Williams attended the salon between 1916 and 1920, appreciating the gathered artists’ interest in a rupture with tradition. In due course he distanced himself, perhaps due to the constant straining for something new that was an inherent part of the avant-garde culture, but possibly from his temperamental resistance to one ideological container. His choice to allow the mundane to become the subjects for his art contributes to arguments for Duchamp’s influence. Duchamp’s initial designs for *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même)* between 1912-1915, developing into the known work during the years 1915-1923, though it was never completed; Duchamp’s process and ideas were likely a part of the conversation in the Arensberg circle.
she appears to the side in the Brueghel painting. As the bride is for the groom, so is the painting for the poem, and the poem for the reader. Majestically, the bride/art/poem by silent royal decree transforms the man/poem/reader into a bridegroom who must “pour the wine.” The reader-viewer engaged by a work of art is thus married to it. We have only to say, “I do.”

Reading to “See”: Understanding in “Parable of the Blind”

Committed to the text, we must as readers then open our eyes to its present requests. The poem guides us to honor it. In Williams’ ninth poem, “The Parable of the Blind,” we are in danger of remaining blind if we do not pay careful attention and learn the lesson provided within Williams’ poems. Here the painting and poem reference Brueghel's depiction of a passage in the New Testament Gospel According to Luke, verse 6.

Luke describes the scene when Jesus violated scriptural and state law and yet argued that he remained in keeping with the spiritual law. Seeing an ailing man, Jesus questioned why scriptural law decreed that no work could be done on the Sabbath, including therefore no healing. Jesus encourages those gathered around him to rejoice and “love ye your enemies and do good, and lend.” The law, as it has been recorded by the scribes, is blind to the need of the wounded man. The law and the scribes are blind, and being led by them is to remain blind oneself. In that context, he asks the question of the parable: “Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?”

The verse continues in section 42 to argue that each must pull the “beam out of thine own eye” before condemning the mote in the other’s eye. Someone partially blinded will never be

---

able to succeed in removing the visual impediment of the other. The task is not merely to notice that others, espousing misguided laws and tenets, are blind, but rather to discover the mote that is blinding you. We remain blind when we see according to another. Finding what blinds will enable an act to be truly good because it is performed in the light of full vision. Such a task, however, is never complete, because the possibility of being blind is always present. To believe we see, ironically, is the greatest blindness. Tentatively, we turn to see Williams’ poem in this light.

Williams opens the poem “The Parable of the Blind,” with his oxymoronic review of the painting as horrible and superb, before reiterating the title of the poem and painting in the second line of the poem. Such emphasis reinforces the pertinence of this fable and replicates the strong visual image of the beggars who take up all the canvas space. Our attention is fixed upon these blind men, both as viewers and readers. The painting depicts the line of four blind men, leading each other, with the first falling into a ditch, so that the title of the painting referencing the parable is virtually self-evident. Williams’ poem, however, also presents the story of the parable, and not simply by narrating the picture but in the very texture of the writing.

Williams describes the painting in some detail. The “beggars leading each other diagonally” and “a peasant/cottage is seen and a church spire” before he concludes:

the faces are raised
as toward the light
there is no detail extraneous

to the composition one
follows the others stick in
hand triumphant to disaster.
The composition of the painting is coherent and intentional because there are no extraneous details. Secondly, however, we must reconsider how we read “one/ follows the others” as referring to the blind men. “One” can refer to each blind man or to a detail in the composition. But which composition? As “Self Portrait” blurred the line between artist and poet, so does the term “composition” here suggest both the pattern of the painting and the organization of the poem. The details of the poem must be carefully considered to avoid the easy assumptions of stability that end in disaster. The “one” is linearly tied to “the composition” which reinforces the cohesion of the composition as one. The parable, the painting, the poem are all about the dangers of being blind in life, in art, in reading. They encourage that we open our eyes.

Williams provokes us to look from the first stanza. His judgmental opening states a detail that is not true:

This horrible but superb painting
the parable of the blind
without a red

in the composition.

Looking at Brueghel’s *The Parable of the Blind*, any viewer will find reds, and so are vindicated as good readers who paid attention to detail in their comparison but also, and equally importantly, as good viewers who noticed the error. Why would Williams mention this color in contradiction to what is there? Weisstein suggests that reproductions often altered colors

---

371 *The Hudson Review* 1960 version of the poem is very different from the later version. Williams altered the first line of the poem in the 1962 New Directions publication, which required that he change all the stanza groupings, make cuts, and reline some words, though nothing new was added. The final lines, for example, were originally published as:

the faces are raised as toward
the light no detail
extraneous to the compos

-ition one following the other
tentative stick in
hand triumphant to disaster
significantly so that any reds might have appeared as violet or purple-toned. Others suggest that the illustrations he had were black and white, or that he couldn’t remember the paintings correctly. Possibly so, but perhaps his color reference also serves as a concrete reference point between painting and poem, provoking readers to do precisely what they have done—look at the painting.

There we see red, and we must determine why Williams would lie to us, which opens up a dialogue. Why mention something that is not in the painting, except to make us wonder if it is? There is no detail extraneous/to the composition—not in Brueghel, not in Williams. One should be careful lest “one/ follows the others stick in/hand triumphant to disaster.” We are made to look, to go beyond what we have been given in the text, to question the authority of the speaker, to refuse to be blind, to see and thereby to claim our own insight. Our ‘red,’ in some sense, is the requirement to have carefully ‘read.’ Thus, through the poem, Williams performs the parable. We can not simply accept what Williams states, but must consider it for ourselves to discern its veracity. The poem calls upon us to think about it.

The poems are not intended as “systematic transposition” from the paintings; offering a “juxtaposition of apparently discrete elements and yet constant reference, direct or oblique, to visual processes, has the effect of...stimulating in the reader/observer an awareness of his or her own act of reading or observation” says David Scott in Pictorialist Poetics, and seems a key element of Williams’ art in this poem. As readers we are guided to question what we are told. Wanting to see, we are asked to consider what about ourselves makes us see as we do. What

---

beam limits our visual possibilities? What distortions do we accept in our reading lens? Can we see them to remove them, or at least acknowledge their presence? In learning to notice what we see, we can begin to consider how we see, describing our own vision and making changes with each new revelation. Across the many forms taken by “The Parable of the Blind” we are encouraged to read, to see, and to think for ourselves.

In this analysis of these poems, I have tried to show how the poem and the painting can take the reader-viewer to new self-understandings by exploring how the poems respond to the paintings, analogous to how a reader/viewer reacts to works of art. Conarroe suggests that “Williams is content to let the viewer discover the work.”374 The poems provide glimpses of something we might see too, if we looked. Brueghel interpreted the world around him, faithful to his sentiment and vision. Likewise Williams does, claiming in “Children’s Games,” the last of the ten poems in *Pictures from Brueghel* that “Brueghel saw it all/ and with his grim// humor faithfully/ recorded/ it.”375 To recognize that one is looking out requires the self-consciousness that is immediately a looking in. Returning to “Self Portrait” Brueghel becomes the general artist who, seeing it all, must also reflect on himself, in theory at least if not in fact. So did Williams observe himself and guides his readers to reflect on themselves that they may see a little more everywhere they look. Each reader/viewer must also go through this process to discover his/her own insight. Seeing art is to see oneself, and seeing oneself may well be the place to begin seeing the art.

---

374 Conarroe, “Measured Dance,” 573.
375 Williams, *Pictures from Brueghel*, 15.
Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* is very much a book about seeing and speaking, or rather the difficulties inherent in either. The first sentence of the book concludes with the word visible but undermines it with the adverb barely: “There was a man standing against the north wall, barely visible.”\(^{376}\) When to see means also to understand, limited visibility is also a covert sign that knowledge is not clear and distinct. The person’s shadowy presence becomes a metaphor for the many issues of presence and representation, especially since that character will remain anonymous. Without a name to represent his presence, he becomes the very representation of the problematic desire for pure presence.

Each of the characters offers variations on the conflicts between vision and speech, experience and description, art and reality, that are examined across this study. Elster’s conviction that “the true life is not reducible to words, spoken or written not by anyone, ever” is derived from his unsuccessful attempt to reduce the word “rendition” to a singular term.\(^{377}\) Finley’s desire to “shoot Elster” for a documentary exclusively about the man’s life invokes the dangers of representation, and substantiates Elster’s hesitation to be filmed. The distinction between art and life that is tenuously maintained by Elster and Finley is dissolved in my


subsequent analysis of the frame narratives, “Anonymity 1” and “Anonymity 2,” which describe an anonymous man’s growing absorption with the Scottish film artist Douglas Gordon’s silent art installation, *24 Hour Psycho*. Identifying what is real and what is not becomes vital to each character. The urgency of the distinction between art and reality, and its unlikely actuality, leads to my final analysis of an alternate term than “representation” for art and texts of all kinds, whose presence seems so uncertain.

*Point Omega* itself has an unsatisfactory presence, in that the pieces of the story can not be unified. The two frame narratives are not clearly associated with the main story about Finley’s visit to Elster in the California desert, includes his conversations with Elster while waiting for his agreement to the documentary, the arrival of Elster’s daughter, and her disappearance. What happens to her is never explained, though seems to vaguely relate to the man in the gallery. This “fractured narrative landscape” frustrated many reviewers, who enjoyed large portions even as they found it generally “hazy and insubstantial” (Burn 8). One review warned that “it will leave even careful readers scratching their heads,” while another described the book as “easy to admire and hard to love” (Vrabel 90; Alsup Esquire.com). Writing for *Vanity Fair*, Còlm Toibin’s review was laudatory, while the *Wall Street Journal* said, “it was the worst book Don DeLillo has ever produced” (Greenwald 78).

Such divisiveness is partly based in the expectation that the reader will gather narrative threads into a single, stable story. A novel is “about” something, should present a conflict and resolution. That narrative arc is the fictive illusion of reality. In *Point Omega*, however, the hope of an “integration into a complete, coherent design remains elusive” because the text, just like language, offers “multiple perspectives that are mutually exclusive”—more like life (Coale 263).
Don DeLillo’s unresolved novel may be an accurate representation of life, but oddly we do not want a representation to present life, but instead to offer life packaged neatly.

Where the two prior studies examined specific works of art in the fictional texts, this study of Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* analyzes the effect of Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho*, a video installation that the characters see at the Museum of Modern Art, but is more generally concerned with art theory than an art historical interpretation of the work and the artist. Douglas Gordon’s interpretation of Hitchcock’s famed film is of course key to the discussion of representation’s many problems, but Elster’s scholarly research on the word “rendition” and Finley’s desire to make a documentary about that scholar also support the general overview of representation’s false presence. The characters’ conversations and hesitations about each other’s work offers an opportunity to reconsider the age-old debate, the terminology of the debate, and consider a possible shift away from representation that the novel suggests.

**WORKING WITH RENDITIONS: A CLOSE LOOK AT ELSTER’S ESSAY**

At the center of Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* is an essay published by one of the main characters, Elster, focused on a discussion of the titular word “rendition.” It appeared in a scholarly journal, received much criticism from the left, and ruined Elster’s academic career, before providing him the startling opportunity to work as a defense intellectual for the United States government. Elster’s philological study of the word “rendition” connects the military work of the government with the intellectual work of the academic and artist. The left’s rejection of his ideas implies that Elster’s argument distanced itself from the typically liberal academic ideology. It thus appealed to the politically right-leaning, military government who hire him to produce
language for their war and then dismiss him for suggesting the term “haiku.” Disillusioned, Elster retreats to his desert cabin where he invites a young film maker, Finley, who hopes to make a documentary about Elster’s change of opinion since the essay to his present isolationist existence in the desert, away from the academics and government he grew to despise. The central story is narrated by Finley during his time with Elster; Finley shares their conversations, Elster’s philosophizing, and his own musings on Elster’s life, particularly the events following the publication of the essay, which he loosely describes.

The essay examines “rendition” in all its variations, from its “earliest known usage, changes in form and meaning, zero-grade forms, reduplicated forms, suffixed forms.” The Oxford English Dictionary is the source cited by Elster in his essay, “with references to Middle English, Old French, Vulgar Latin, and other sources and origins.” Elster uncovers a spectrum of meanings that are all linked by the root term. Finding commonality subscribes to Augustine’s universality claim for hermeneutics, which is at the base of any philological study: words with a root relation have common concepts underlying them, even if seemingly different.

Most of the essay is a philological study, but Elster opens his essay stating “the government is a criminal enterprise” and then introduces the word “rendition” as a form of manual labor. He asks the reader to consider these descriptive definitions as metaphor, though he never specifies the metaphoric allusion, requiring his reader to interpret it.

A coat of plaster applied to a masonry surface. From this he asked the reader to consider a walled enclosure in an unnamed country and a method of questioning,

378 DeLillo, Point Omega, 34.
379 Any reader of Proust’s In Search of Lost Time may feel irresistibly drawn to remember Elstir, the painter who introduces him to Albertine and whose works inaugurate for him the possibilities of an aesthetic appreciation for the world.
380 DeLillo, Point Omega, 33-4. In keeping with DeLillo’s dictionary of choice for Elster, all definitions come from the OED.
using what he called enhanced interrogation techniques, that was meant to induce a surrender.\textsuperscript{381}

The description of such a type of interrogation is known as an extraordinary rendition, which originated in the United States to describe “the seizure and transportation by authorities of a criminal suspect from one country to another without the formal process of extradition,” according to the OED. It is specifically used in reference to capturing terrorist suspects and deporting them to unspecified locations, where interrogations can be pursued that violate legally sanctioned methods. These practices by the United States government are covert actions because the United States is bound by laws that require the humane treatment of prisoners. Such egregious efforts however expect that information revealed will undermine, or even avoid, potential future terrorist attacks.

Elster concludes the essay by revisiting the cement masonry room he had constructed at the beginning of the essay to suggest that behind those walls “a drama is being enacted, old as human memory.”\textsuperscript{382} He develops an analogy to theatre to associate the arts with the government enterprise. The left is outraged by Elster’s description of an extraordinary rendition in theatrical terms, reminiscent of many urban, underground theatre presentations of the late 20th century.\textsuperscript{383}

...actors naked, chained, blindfolded, other actors with props of intimidation, the renderers, nameless and masked, dressed in black, and what ensues, he wrote, is a revenge play that reflects the mass will and interprets the shadowy need of an entire nation, ours.\textsuperscript{384}

\textsuperscript{381} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 33.
\textsuperscript{382} ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{383} I remember seeing an off-off-Broadway production of \textit{Hamlet}, for which the characters dressed in leather, vinyl, and metal studs, engaging in assorted sado-masochistic relationships. Ophelia is whipped by her lecherous father; Hamlet and Horatio are violently gay lovers. At various intervals of the production, some actors were “naked, chained, blindfolded” while “other actors with props of intimidation” recited lines from the excised play. This writer had conveniently forgotten that production until DeLillo’s passage in \textit{Point Omega}.
\textsuperscript{384} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 34.
Elster places responsibility for the illegal and unethical activities of the government on the citizens of the United States. In a representative government, such as that of the United States of America, the government and those in power represent the citizens. The citizens in Elster’s essay need the drama of superiority; after 9/11, many demanded to prove that the greatness of the United States had not been diminished despite the surprise attack on the Pentagon, the World Trade Center, and, though unsuccessful, the White House. These symbols of the military, financial, cultural, and political power of the United States had been assaulted, and a surge of nationalistic fervor demanded that the strength of the union be once again asserted. A refusal to eat French Fries and a march into the Middle East proclaimed the United States’ power through ludicrous symbolism and military might.  

DeLillo’s novel, published in 2010, suggests this backdrop of the United States engagement in Iraq and the Middle East, during the first decade of the 21st Century, though DeLillo was explicit in an interview that *Point Omega* was not a political novel.  

Elster implies in his language that the government is simply performing the desires of a nation of damaged egos. The politically charged extraordinary renditions represent what the people want—revenge. Hired by the government, the nameless actors render the violence that proves the continuing power of the United States. These actions occur based on interpreting the nation’s “mass will” by reading between the lines of their outcries. The whole nation, the government, the people, and the culture are responsible for the drama, yet hidden by anonymity. The government no longer shoulders responsibility for the war. According to Elster’s essay, the

---

385 Interestingly, the *OED* provides an applicable quote for the zero form “rend” that relates rendition to the aggressive American nationalism by examining its implications; for its 5.b example of the verb “to rend” the dictionary references a 2002 issue of *Foreign Policy* (Nov.—Dec. 74): “America's nascent neoimperial grand strategy threatens to rend the fabric of the international community.”

386 David Cowart argues that DeLillo knows “political directness risks overballasting the literary bark” (Cowart 41).
military is simply enacting the electorate’s “shadowy need” for a “revenge play.” Political representation is produced when elected persons “act for” other persons, but that substitution does not mitigate the electorate from responsibility for the actions produced by those acting on their behalf. Theatre is an obvious place where political representation (“act for”) and aesthetic representation (“stand for”) seem to be the same. W.J.T. Mitchell writes about the confusing distinction between these two.

There are vast differences, of course, between Laurence Olivier playing Hamlet and Ronald Reagan playing the role of the president—the difference say, between playing and real life; between a rigid script and an open, improvised performance; or between an aesthetic contract and a legal one—but these should not blind us to the structural similarities of the two forms of representation or to the complex interaction between playful fantasy and serious reality in all forms of representation.

The correlations to be found, however, do not mean a collapse of one into the other. Ronald Reagan may have been an actor for entertainment purposes in Hollywood and for political purposes in the White House, but they remain distinct. Similarities can be drawn, but the erasure of any difference is problematic. In representative government, the relationship of representation

---

387 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 34. This combination of theatre and politics is reminiscent of Danto’s comment in “Artworks and Mere Real Things” that “Politics becomes a form of theater, clothing a kind of costume, human relations a kind of role, life a game. We interpret ourselves and our gestures as we once interpreted artworks. We look for meanings and unities, we become players in a play,” Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 17.

388 In Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers*, one character mocks another’s political sit-in at the United Nations: “You ‘staged’ your dissent—just as you say. I’m remembering more now. I heard about it from someone who was there. You all removed the bandages from your faces as this coordinated act of protest, strip by strip, ever so slowly.” Didier gestured with his hands as if lifting bandages from his own face. “Reporters all around you. There to see the terrible damage as you unveiled yourselves, the few survivors who managed to plunge themselves in a river, jellied gasoline clinging to their cheeks and arms and ribs, the smell of charred flesh—” “Sounds practically like you were there, Didier,” Ronnie said. “No, Ronnie. I just think it’s important to draw distinctions between real violence and theatre.” Kushner, *The Flamethrowers*, 170-1.

is indexical, since the president represents the people because the people elected that person. In a theatrical event, the relationship of representation can be iconic, symbolic and indexical. Its representational complexity is due to its acknowledged departure from reality.

Finley explains that Elster’s philological research on the word “rendition” addressed the term’s application in relation to construction and power, until the end of the essay when Elster offers three other definitions, which specifically applied to the arts and academia. By introducing “current meanings of the word rendition: interpretation, translation, performance,” Elster linked the intellectual and aesthetic use of the word and the government’s military application. The academic left apply the term to an artist’s rendition of an object or idea, a translator’s rendition of a foreign language text into English, or a performer’s rendition of a play script or musical score. The readers of a journal article on philology would recognize these uses of the term. Elster’s suggestion that the extraordinary renditions of the government are a “revenge play” reinforces the analogy of similarity.

Sontag wrote that “interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art” in her essay “Against Interpretation.” Before, interpretation “erected another meaning on top of the literal one, but the modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs

---

390 This dismisses concerns that the president is iconic—for example, “this person looks like a president and so I will vote for him” such as some believe occurred in J.F. Kennedy’s electoral win over Nixon—or that the president is symbolic, wherein corporations run the country and put up an arbitrary (though iconically attractive) person to conceal that fact.
391 DeLillo, Point Omega, 34.
392 The term “rendition,” though not much examined, is prevalent. The literary scholar David Cowart poses the question how “an artist can, without didacticism, incorporate political perceptions into work that they might render tendentious”; Cowart, “The Lady Vanishes,” 32. Barbara Johnson in a footnote to her translation of Derrida’s Dissemination explains that she mostly used the classic Bollingen series translations of Plato, but “also consulted and sometimes partially adapted the renditions given in” other translations, which she then lists for the reader’s reference, 66. DeLillo comments upon Glenn Gould’s choice after 26 years away to return to and re-record Bach’s Goldberg Variations as a “rendition” that is “somber and slower” as the pianist engages “in a form of corrective self-dialogue”; Don DeLillo, “Counterpoint: Three Movies, a Book, and an Old Photograph,” Grand Street, no. 73 Spring 2004, 44.
393 Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, and Other Essays (New York: Picador, 2001), 7.
‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.”394 Arguing on behalf of experiencing and enjoying a work of art, literary or otherwise, she decries precisely the type of masonry work and interrogations of Elster’s definition for “rendition,” used for either academic interpretations or government intelligence. She speaks of interpretation as a “revenge” of the intellect on an object that has more than intellectual value, just as Elster found the renderers to be participating in a revenge play. Angry that there is more than can be grasped, the mind interprets a work of art in order to contain its otherwise anarchic potential.

Elster’s close examination of the word “rendition” reveals a commonality between two disparate uses. The government hopes Elster will word-smith a military engagement to ease public relations concerns around a war. Elster is expected to “conceptualize, his words, in quotes, to apply overarching ideas and principles to such matters as troop deployment and counter-insurgency.”395 The work of artists and academics requires interrogation and analysis, just as the government produces performances and interpretations. There is violence in the arts, and artistry in the government.396 The government hopes that Elster’s ability to use language in new ways will help them find new frameworks to explain actions and events.

According to Barthes in his essay “Myth Today,” the “right” produces mythic language by depoliticizing language, while the left tries to keep language alive by noting its political power; eliminating the historical allows the world and things to seem ‘natural’ in an “indefinite repetition of its identity.”397 Elster’s transformation of the term “rendition” in his essay appeals to the government because the government’s renditions are then no longer egregious. Those who

394 Sontag, Against Interpretation, 6.
395 DeLillo, Point Omega, 19.
396 First Lady Michelle Obama’s support of the American military fighting abroad in a live feed from Afghanistan during the 2013 Oscars is an example of how our wars are rendered entertainment.
fault the government’s violent acts produce the same upon their objects of study. A rendition is a
violent act for which people should feel guilt and shame, or it is how information is gathered by
the military and academic world, and either makes it a sin for which to feel guilty. Barthes offers
seven common rhetorical figures of myth, many of which apply to Elster’s presentation of the
word “rendition.”

Elster’s first sentence is a statement of fact, which implies that what is said is common
sense, without need for reflection. Such statements have a proverbial nature, like maxims. “A
government is a criminal enterprise” is no longer a call to action, but rather a recognized given
about which nothing can be done. The sentence also acts as an inoculation, which is the first
figure of mythic speech that Barthes mentions. Inoculation admits an accidental, small evil in
order to safeguard against the larger evil. By recognizing that the government is criminal, it can
be forgiven for its misdemeanors, and thereby be saved from attack for its acts of terror.

A statement of fact also acts as a tautology. Because things are as they are, they cannot be
otherwise. This tautological quality of a statement of fact impedes possible action because no
revolution can alter the course of what has been described as static. Tautology also occurs when
Elster summons theatre to associate the renditions of the left and right. Drama is drama, he
implies, when he places a theatrical willingly performed by all its actors next to a masked
inquisition where at least one participant is restrained. In one, the performers are guided to their
actions but remain free to leave; in the other, the person being interrogated is physically
constrained, and often the interrogator may not quit until the desired information is retrieved.

Elster provides a false tautology. The appearance of similarity only exists at the most superficial

---

398 Barthes lists the seven rhetorical devices: Inoculation, privation of History, Identification, Tautology, Neither-
Norism, quantification of quality, and the statement of fact. Barthes, Mythologies, 150-154,
399 Barthes, Mythologies, 151.
level. One “rendition” refers to an interpretation of a play, while the other “rendition” uses theatre as a metaphoric presentation of physical actions that constrain a person’s freedom. The qualities of the two “dramas” remain very different.

By equating the work of the left and right, Elster produces a situation where two opposites are balanced by one another and so both are made ridiculous. The right may be rejected, but the left will be as well. Barthes refers to this as “neither-norism” for how it refuses any option provided. Two different parties are brought together to be weighed by their formal qualities. Their specifics are eliminated, as seen in the example of drama above. Because they have no particular qualities, they balance one another and so are equally good and bad. They may both be rejected. “Conservatives and liberals are just the same” is a common cocktail party remark regarding politics, inevitably followed by the speaker’s choice to reject them both. This figure leads to cynicism and even despair as it “immobilizes values, life, destiny.” It is a type of nihilism.

The first three definitions in the OED review how “rendition” relates to giving or delivering, where what is offered is often however “given” unwillingly, extracted by force and intention. Like a military interrogation, the information is dragged from the source. A translation extracts a line of meaning from many possibilities. A performer stakes an approach through studying the text. A philologist plunders a word to determine meaning by studying etymology and historical context. The investigator, by continuous critical inquiry, grasps the information and shapes it for a presentation—a work of art, a political mission, or an intellectual argument.

400 Barthes, Mythologies, 153.
The abstracted act may be the same, but its practice and its outcome are easily differentiated once contextualized.

The extraordinary renditions of the military are violent and secret. Translations are not. Theatrical productions are not. Drawings based on paintings and architectural models are not. Published philological studies are explicitly authored (although they may have been submitted to an anonymous peer-review committee). Renditions produced through investigations of an inanimate object—despite hyperbolic academic concerns of torturing a text or art work—are not travesties like the physical abuse in the renditions of government.

Each use defines the parameters of a general definition, thereby subtly altering the word’s meaning across multiple contexts. The use of the word in one place influences its whole meaning, which must then be applied to the specific use. This transformation is the hermeneutic circle, which Elster’s philology-reading academic audience would find familiar. The rhetoric of Elster’s argument posits a commonality between the academic left and the government, but that similarity is produced through sophistry.

No definition for the term “rendition” can encompass all its uses. No definition can present the word’s complex meanings. If a definition serves as a form of explanation, then the word’s contextual use is significant to understanding what is meant. Elster can only offer a representation of the word “rendition,” which is therefore inherently reductive, insufficient, incomplete. How the world is described is not determined through an individual’s perception, but through an acceptance of that description by others who understand and concur. Elster’s desire to subdue language to some molecular origin that is all-encompassing is tied to his desire for pure
presence. Words not only do not offer presence (various religious dogmas to the contrary) but can’t even represent since they are constantly morphing to accommodate new uses.

Elster confronts this ceaseless evolution when he tried to delimit the word “haiku” and apply it for the government’s upcoming war. Elster wanted to offer the military establishment a haiku war, where “haiku means nothing beyond what it is” and can in its prescribed syllable count and three lines provide a link between a set of ideas and transient material things; DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 28.

Elster confronts this ceaseless evolution when he tried to delimit the word “haiku” and apply it for the government’s upcoming war. The military would not have it, and much to Elster’s surprise, they got to dictate the terms of his work—literally. Elster confronts how “human perception is a saga of created reality” with “agreed-upon limits of recognition or interpretation” whereby some renditions will not be accepted. When the military reject his redefinition of haiku, he realizes that the meaning of words is a matter of compromise, not his to determine. Losing the centrality of his ego, he determines that language is not a pure presentation but operates as signs of reality, and is thus a falsification. Recognizing that social factors (acceptance of the new meaning by people) influence meaning, Elster rejects language as a veil to “the true life,” because no word can declare or define the enormity of being.

“YOU TALK, I SHOOT”: THE NARRATIVE OF FINLEY’S DOCUMENTARY

The essay’s controversial claims started the chain of events that led Elster to his reclusive lifestyle in the desert. Here, he disdains language because “life is not reducible to words, spoken or written, by anyone, anywhere.” For Elster, the person exists “beneath the running thoughts and dim images,” truly experiencing life only when “alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory,

---

401 Elster wanted to offer the military establishment a haiku war, where “haiku means nothing beyond what it is” and can in its prescribed syllable count and three lines provide a link between a set of ideas and transient material things; DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 28.
403 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 17.
dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments.” Words are unnecessary for the true life that Elster seeks, because life cannot be summed by the parts of speech, in any media form.

For the documentary that Finley wishes to make about Elster, Finley needs his subject to create a narrative thread through the three phases of life as a scholar, a military defense intellectual, and a recluse. Finley wants Elster to explain “his time in government, in the blat and stammer of Iraq” with his subsequent rejection of the military establishment that he had endorsed earlier. Elster, conversely, taunts Finley that the documentary would be no pure presentation of Elster’s experience, but another type of performance.

A public confession...A deathbed conversion. This is what you want. The foolishness, the vanity of the intellectual. The blind vanity, the worship of power. Forgive me, absolve me.

Finley denies it, but has “to fight off this notion, inwardly” because, as Elster explains, the only reason to produce such a documentary is to show Elster confessing his wrongs. Elster’s opinion on the war and the government are known because of his article, so documenting those views is unnecessary. To change them, to suggest that Elster has revised his opinion, however, would be a new statement. Elster’s conversion, against his previous beliefs, is enticing material for a documentary because it allows him to be redeemed—but, only if he is willing to reject his earlier statements. Finley believes the documentary would be an honest exposé of Elster, and avoids considering how Elster’s statements would be interpreted through the lens of the past, or through Finley’s directorial eye.

---

404 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 17.
405 ibid., Didier, a leading character in Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers*, expresses a similar sentiment but finds a different conclusion than Elster, “The power and emptiness of words. And yet they rule us nonetheless. Are the sole horizon. Language as the house of being. The home of being, excuse me.”
407 ibid., 53.
As a documentary director, Finley is startlingly naive about his participation in the final product. Finley wants to capture Elster’s life without any of the aesthetic aspects of his first, “freakish fifty-seven-minute movie,” for which he obsessively spliced scenes from Jerry Lewis’ marathon television fundraisers, “well beyond the limits of information and objectivity.”

Finley hopes to avoid artifice with this documentary. Finley will ask no questions, so the single, unedited take, which focuses on Elster, would determine the content, while the length would likewise be determined by Elster since the camera will only stop rolling when Elster stops speaking. Finley intends these choices to reveal Elster, but those choices are significant aesthetic decisions, rules that he has placed on his subject matter, which determine the final film. The documentary will pretend an authentic presentation of a man’s life but actually have an element of falsity in its purported faithfulness to his reality.

Finley’s direction seems disinterested but stems from an obsessive approach. He becomes fixated with his subject matter. With his first film on Jerry Lewis, he watched hours of the celebrity’s fundraising hijinks, becoming “Jerry’s frenzied double, eyeballs popping out.” He “found something religious” in such strenuous attention. Finley has shown an equal focus with Elster. Finley followed Elster around a Dada show, watching his appreciation of the nonsense texts and images, before approaching him. Finley leads Elster to the Douglas Gordon video installation, then on display in the museum, as a way of introducing the possibility of producing a documentary, but Elster flatly refuses to be filmed. When Finley receives an invitation to join Elster, however, he flies to California from New York City, and then drives hours into the middle

408 DeLillo, Point Omega, 87, 25.
409 ibid., 27.
410 ibid., 25.
411 ibid., 46-7, 60-1.
of the desert.\textsuperscript{412} He quite literally lives with his subject in anticipation of the project. While he waits for Elster’s willingness to begin the film, Finley watches the aging man, noticing this desert existence, trying to remain disinterested.

Finley has narrowed his thought about the documentary to the location where Elster would be filmed: “The wall is right, I think about it dream about it, I open my eyes and see it, I close my eyes it’s there.”\textsuperscript{413} His focus on location, however, doesn’t alter his hopes for the action. He has thought about “the color and texture of the wall, and I’d thought about the man’s face, the features were strong but also collapsible in the show of whatever cruel truths might come spilling into his eyes.”\textsuperscript{414} Finley believes that he will not impinge on Elster’s presentation, or on how Elster might appear on film, even as he reveals his own desire to have Elster collapse during his confession.\textsuperscript{415} There will be no alteration to Elster’s “truth” because he claims, “Whatever you say, that’s the film, you’re the film, you talk, I shoot.”\textsuperscript{416}

Finley will shoot Elster. The word is meant to indicate that Finley will film Elster, but the verb has the hint of violence that comes from its alternate application to firing weapons.

“No plush armchair with warm lighting and books on a shelf in the background. Just a man and a wall,” I told him. “The man stands there and relates the complete experience, everything that comes to mind, personalities, theories, details, feelings. You’re the man. There’s no offscreen voice asking questions. There’s no interspersed combat footage or comments from others, on camera or off.”

“What else?”

“A simple head shot.”\textsuperscript{417}

\textsuperscript{412} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 20-1, 61.
\textsuperscript{413} ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{414} ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{415} ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{416} ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{417} ibid., 21.
Like a prisoner in front of a firing squad, Elster will be shot, against a wall, alone, without support. Finley expects Elster, who has been reduced to the singular universal “man,” to recount “the complete experience” as if Elster can possibly say it all. He wants a film that only offers Elster, without corrupting that viewpoint by another’s, and yet in so doing he isolates Elster much like a prisoner interrogated for information. Elster becomes a talking head, no body to attach him to this world. Elster is not placed in dialogue with others through the use of commentary from other military personnel or intellectuals. There will be no combat footage to contextualize the situation of Elster’s decisions and understanding. Finley will not participate by asking questions, editing, or offering varying camera angles. The purity of this practice intends to better reveal Elster’s work, but the documentary inherently would frame Elster, both visually and by providing a text about him that others can judge.

This representation of Elster is not unlike Elster’s representation of “renditions,” in broaching art and violence. In effect, my reading is precisely like Elster’s suggestion that the renditions of artists and scholars are akin to the government’s renditions. Analogously, then, Finley’s documentary is a rendition, a point to which we will return later in this argument. For now, let us remember the uncomfortable layering of art and violence that is beginning to occur across each character, and note that the art destroys the subject’s relation to truth, and the violence annihilates the metaphoric possibilities of art.

To continue, Elster’s experience would be formed into language, another “created reality,” which will appear as truth but be false, will appear innocent but violate the fullness of his experience. His description would be a performance, a staged recounting that transforms a life experience into a constrained media work, a representation to be interpreted by viewers and
critics. The documentary is a visual medium, but Finley’s focus is Elster’s speech, making it a linguistic rendition of Elster’s experience working for military intelligence. He claims that “film is the barricade...the one where somebody stands and tells the truth.”\textsuperscript{418} Finley perceives the film as being an expressionist representation, because it “does not ‘represent’ something, except incidentally; it ‘is’ something, an object with an indwelling spirit, a trace in matter of the activity of the immaterial.”\textsuperscript{419} Finley is convinced his documentary can avoid the issues of representation. Elster, however does not believe this, because “the true life is not reducible to words, spoken or written, not by anyone, ever.”\textsuperscript{420} The truth cannot be uttered according to Elster, because life itself is that truth. Any attempts to articulate life’s experiences are mimesis, a false representation, and the documentary only increases the substitution.

This conflict is the basis for their conversations, the only action between them as Finley waits for Elster’s decision. Eventually, Elster’s daughter visits, and her sudden disappearance is the conflict that unravels the remaining action, seemingly connecting the different parts of the story, though her disappearance is never explained, the men’s relationship never resolved. The story about Elster and Finley is framed by an anonymous attendee’s account of two days in a museum gallery, watching a video work. His narrative not only causes the reader to shift points of view, but also introduces questions on how language, documentation, art, and texts of all kinds are understood.

\textsuperscript{418} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 45.
\textsuperscript{420} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 17.
“SO INTENSELY WHAT IT IS”: VOIDING SPEECH IN THE GALLERY

The opening and closing scenes that bookend the central narrative of *Point Omega* offer an extreme example of an attempt to reach the “true life,” unreduced by or to language, completely immersed in what is seen. These two sections are set in a museum gallery where Hitchcock’s *Psycho* is projected.\(^{421}\) The video artist, Douglas Gordon, slowed the 110 minute film at 24 frames per second down to two frames per second, thereby lengthening the classic to a full day, with all dialogue and sound eliminated. No dialogue within the film, nor any text in the museum gallery, provides conceptual guidance. The work must be experienced solely as it is. A man stands in the gallery day after day, watching this rendition, waiting for complete comprehension.

It takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you. It takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at. He was mesmerized by this, the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion, the things to see, the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing.\(^{422}\)

The third-person narrator of the opening and closing sections is focalized through an anonymous man in the gallery. The narrator has access to all his private confusions and desires, but cannot provide anything beyond what the man in the gallery thinks, such as a psychological or biographical background. The transposed thoughts of this man, however, center the reader around him as he struggles to give the work his entire attention. The film’s reality becomes his consuming passion, the point that his consciousness should attain through a “complete immersion.”\(^{423}\)

---

\(^{421}\) The work is acknowledged at the end of the novel, but within the first four pages references to Anthony Perkins and the Bates Motel make evident that Hitchcock’s 1960 film classic is on display. Hitchcock’s film is such a popular media icon and sufficient clues are given that a reader can likely recognize what viewers in the gallery are seeing. This video installation exists; in 2006, the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed 24 Hour Psycho by Douglas Gordon, a Scottish video artist.

\(^{422}\) *DeLillo*, *Point Omega*, 13.

\(^{423}\) Ibid., 115.
The slow motion allows him to attend to small details, specific actions, “when an actor moved a muscle, when eyes blinked, it was a revelation. Every action was broken into components so distinct from the entity that the watcher found himself isolated from every expectation.” He notices each movement occur, each moment pass, surprised by how much is revealed each time, though he never clarifies the nature of these revelations.

It was only the closest watching that yielded this perception. He found himself undistracted for some minutes by the coming and going of others and he was able to look at the film with the degree of intensity that was required. The nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it. The film’s merciless pacing had no meaning without a corresponding watchfulness, the individual whose absolute alertness did not betray what was demanded.

“Only the closest watching” leads to a thorough perception. Unless he gives it his undivided attention, he will not see all there is in each moment. He must ignore other visitors and distractions. A “degree of intensity” is required, to produce the concentration and watchfulness that the “merciless pacing” of the film requires. His attention is a “pious effort” elicited by the film’s slow pacing. He understands the respect necessary, wanting “the thing he sees” to finally be “sharing consciousness with him.” He equates the gallery with a monument, a place of preservation, a medieval church where silence and attention are a form of respect, in the root sense of the word to see and to see again. Such attention is the only way to find and absorb the authoritative meaning.

His focus makes him disdain the haphazard and confused “coming and going” of the other visitors. People enter the room, stand “in the dark and looked at the screen and then they

---

425 ibid., 5.
426 ibid., 13.
427 ibid., 115.
428 This reverence is not unusual as museums are designed to cultivate reverence. See, the first section “Written on the Wall.”
left. Sometimes they hardly moved past the doorway.\textsuperscript{429} Adults leave, unwilling to give the work their extended viewing. Children “lingered just inside the door, not sure whether they wanted to investigate whatever it was they’d walked into.”\textsuperscript{430} Those who stay, move through the room “in uneasy passage.”\textsuperscript{431} Uncomfortable with the silence, the lack of explanation, the slowness and who knows what else, most visitors quickly leave the room.

The viewers don’t see “fractured motion, film stills on the border of benumbed life” as a deep engagement with this icon of American film history and culture. They do not attempt to immerse themselves in the experience. It is only a slow-paced version of the movie they have seen on their couches at home, comfortable in their surroundings, “dishes in the sink.”\textsuperscript{432} The man in the gallery notes that the visitors to the room enter, leave, “forgetting what they’d seen in the seconds it took to turn and move.”\textsuperscript{433} Where Hitchcock’s film offers psychological suspense that compells attention forward, Douglas Gordon’s slowed work abandons plot and puts in question what else is to be viewed.

Some guests’ confusion causes them to look around, “seeking eye contact, some kind of understanding that might pass between them and make their bafflement valid.”\textsuperscript{434} They want to see what makes this work worth watching, but cannot understand what they should be seeing. Without any descriptors to frame the work, most viewers are confused. They feel isolated by their confusion, seeking reassurance in another’s confirmation. Glancing at the guard to see if he can explain this silent dark room, they hope he will offer meaning, or validate that this

\textsuperscript{429} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 3.
\textsuperscript{430} ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{431} ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{432} ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{433} ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{434} ibid., 4.
experience is a violation of their art expectations. The guard who is “staring into the daylong
narrates of his detachment,” has no response to offer.435

The man in the gallery is alone in his respect and attention, until he projects his
experience on two men who enter the room. Physical traits convince him they must be film
scholars (whom the reader will later discern are Elster and Finley of the central narrative).

He watched them a moment longer, the academics, adepts of film, of film theory,
film syntax, film and myth, the dialectics of film, the metaphysics of film, as Janet
Leigh began to undress for the blood-soaked shower to come[...] He wondered if
they were seeing what he was seeing.436

He is confident that, as film scholars, they are paying attention with the same degree of intensity
that he is. He adds layers of voyeurism. The film’s viewers participate in a doubled vision, by
watching Janet Leigh undress but also watching Norman Bates (the infamous psycho) watching
her through the hole in the wall. The man in the gallery adds his watching other viewers to these
two layers. The sophistication of the two film scholars assures him that they surely draw even
more complicated conclusions, by finding “references across a range of filmographies and
disciplines.”437 The scholars can abstract the violent shower scene that is about to occur beyond
its murderous enactment. They can consider its production value because they are “watching
intently” just as he does, the basis of their “shared something” and “kind of rare fellowship.”438

435 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 103. “The guard was here but did not count as a presence in the room. The guard was here
to be unseen. This was his job. The guard faced the edge of the screen but was looking nowhere, looking at whatever
museum guards look at when a room stands empty,” 7. The guard exists as a non-entity, his presence based on a
pretense that he is absent. The man in the gallery recognizes the guard’s anonymity, claiming it is similar to his own
distance, 105. The guard is not there to help visitors but to protect the work of art from a visitor’s too close
approach, while remaining immaterial. The man in the gallery finds that “the guard purified the occasion, made it
finer and rarer” because he brings attention to the objects of the room that may need protection—some visitors
“might climb the screen and claw it, tourists from movie malls”—as the art is of greater value than the humans
within the space, who are thereby demeaned, 102. In a foreshadowing of the anonymous man’s violent imagination,
he wonders why the guards don’t wear sidearms since “there is priceless art to protect and a man with a gun would
clarify the act of seeing for the benefit of everyone,” 112.

He interprets their superficial elements, dress and behavior, into personalities and interests in order to establish a kind of kinship. They appear to be people who must see what is so intensely there for him.

When they leave “just like that,” he is bewildered and takes it personally. The criteria for their connection are severed upon their exit. His deep engagement repudiates what he perceives as their shallow appreciation. He determines that the lack of language was too difficult for them since, as scholars, “they had to think in words. This was their problem. The action moved too slowly to accommodate their vocabulary of film.” He declares that they are not serious about seeing, because they are stuck in language: “Their vocabulary of film, he thought, could not be adapted to curtain rods and curtain rings and eyelets.” The man in the gallery ends his disapproval of their limited vision on “eyelets,” which addresses the shower curtain scene that is the background film event during this narrative scene, but which also emphasizes the importance he places on sight. Their scholarly erudition theorizes and cannot confront the basic physical qualities of this rendition. They cannot appreciate the pure visuality of the extended scenes and close-ups, because they are immersed in meaning-making. The drive to compose concepts in language blocks their ability to see and experience the minutiae that constitute the whole. The gallery only belongs to those who can see, not to those who require articulation.

Gordon’s effort evokes an abstract theory of representation, wherein the representational means and manner are the focus (the signifier rather than the signified or the sign). Film is about film elements, not about the plot or characterization, concepts or ideas. In formalist theories of representation, the represented object can even disappear as Hitchcock’s *Psycho* does here since

---

439 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 10. His rejection of them alters their departure into an exile, though he is kinder to the younger man whom he assumes is forced to leave out of respect for the older academic, lest he damage his budding reputation, 11.
the slowing annihilates the original. Galerie Eva Presenhuber, which represents Gordon, attempts to explain the theory behind Gordon’s project.

The plot takes place so slowly that you can never anticipate what happens next. The past confuses our memory. Because the images follow one another at such a slow rate, you cannot possibly remember them. The past continues, and the future never happens, so everything remains in the present. The present is where the future and the past converge continuously. As Heidegger said: It doesn’t really exist.

In such acute representational situations, “the potential witnesses to the representational act are reduced finally to an elite of technical experts and connoisseurs who appreciate ostensibly nonrepresentational object” just as the man in the gallery perceives himself, and briefly the two “film scholars” to be.440

At the end of the first section, having dismissed all visitors as inadequate viewers, he acknowledges a desire for a companion who would not require conversation. In the second part, he describes this idealized meeting as an encounter between “two like souls,” whose gaze would ensure they understood one another; he “imagines them staring at each other for a long moment, here in the dark, a frank and open look, a truthful look, strong and probing, and then they stop staring and turn and watch the film, without a word passing between them.”441 The great and honest truth would occur through their “look” rather than the word. His true relationship would provide an intensity of absolute presence, without mitigation by language. According to him, the visual offers the “real” because he does not interpret the images as signs, so it alone provides immediate experience.

441 DeLillo, Point Omega, 110.
This notion of relationship is complicated when a young woman approaches him along the back wall of the gallery. She questions him about the film, which startles him because “being spoken to” changes “every rule of separation.” Even though he desires relationship, he imagines it occurring without language. His own inconsistency is revealed here, however, as he also perceives how language acts as a bridge between two separate beings. Dialogue requires reciprocity, while being alone means there is “nothing to share, nothing to take from others, nothing to give to others.” In this nothing, there is no exchange between self and other. He can only conceive companionship as one of mutuality and unity—“two like souls.” Her question breaches his universalizing isolation.

Language slices through his sense of immersed totality. As he watches the “hand and knife in midframe” of Anthony Perkins repeatedly stabbing the detective at the bottom of the stairs, he is frustrated that her voice is “nowhere near a whisper.” Her speech cuts through the silence, shocking him further when she asks if the film is a comedy. Such a thought had never occurred to him. The film has been a serious metaphysical experience for him. The possibility that others see differently bothers him: “Did the slow pulse of projection reveal something to one person and conceal it to another?” Her voice makes him confront how the film is not one reality; others experience it differently and, therefore, his understanding is not absolute. The violent background of the Hitchcock murder scene underscores the rupture her statement initiates. Reality may not only be what he finds projected around him.

---

43 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 106.  
44 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 110.  
45 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 106.  
46 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 111.
Standing next to her, he imagines conversations they might have, but is incapable of acting on his ideas. When the woman decides to leave, he becomes disturbed, wishing she would stay, have dinner with him, and follows her to the museum entrance to get her information. When she asks him about himself, he cannot share a personal trait, but offers a lie, which begins to indicate his withdrawal from his own life into the artificial reality of Douglas Gordon’s 24-hour installation. In the confusion after getting her phone number but forgetting to ask her name, he rushes back to the sanctuary of the dark, quiet gallery. There, his imagined relationship becomes aggressive, and “he imagined turning and pinning her to the wall with the room emptied out except the guard who is looking straight ahead, nowhere, motionless, the film still running, the woman pinned, also motionless, watching the film over his shoulder.”

He creates a scene in which she is a living doll, forced to see the film as he wants her to watch it.

The film literature on Hitchcock is rife with arguments about his objectified women, sexualized violence or even simply “the possibility of extreme violence into apparently (or indeed actually) innocent stories and locations.” Laura Mulvey’s work on the gaze in her landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is staged within a study of film directors that include Hitchcock. The viewer is situated in a masculine viewpoint through camera angles

---

447 DeLillo, Point Omega, 112.
448 Michael Wood, “The Paranoid Elite,” London Review of Books, April 22, 2010, 40; Wood’s review also identifies an allusion to another Hitchcock film, The Birds, in the novel’s closing words: “Sometimes a wind comes before the rain and sends birds sailing past the window, spirit birds that ride the night, stranger than dreams.” David Cowart provides an elegant intertextual explanation of the daughter’s disappearance: “DeLillo reimagines and rethinks Hitchcock’s terrifying premise [in Psycho]. In the film, one recalls, a woman comes to grief at the hands of a psychopath; in DeLillo’s novel, a woman’s fate again leads her to an isolated lodging where horror overtakes her. But where the cinematic master delivers mysteries solved and crimes punished, DeLillo offers his readers only postmodern uncertainty: we never learn what has happened to Jessie Elster. As if in homage to another Hitchcock movie, the lady vanishes. David Cowart, “The Lady Vanishes,” Comparative Literature 53, no. 2 (2012), 34. All three of these Hitchcock films (The Birds, Psycho, and The Lady Vanishes) objectify and even attack the female.
and staging, which gaze upon the female as an object of desire. Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” is almost too apt for the man in the gallery. Her concern about the effect on the viewer, and “his” attitudes towards women, is exemplified in the man’s immersion into the hypnotic film reality of Douglas Gordon’s rendition. The anonymous character is the archetypal scopophiliac—the voyeur whose desire to watch the passive other provides a place of power—and he becomes drawn to aggressive acts, fantasizing shades of violence.

Since the beginning, the man wanted to be “transmigrating from this body to the quivering image on the screen.” He becomes immersed in the film in the last pages of the book, finally stepping in front of the screen “and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates.” For the final three sentences of the book, the pronoun “he” refers either to the man in the gallery or the character Norman Bates, the psycho of Hitchcock’s film. Both Norman Bates and the anonymous man shed the constraints of their own life to become immersed in their projected view of reality.

In the opening, when Norman Bates is at the peephole to watch Marion undress, the man in the gallery comments on how everybody is watching somebody. That passage reveals his sensitivity and self-consciousness about being seen by others: “He had no idea what he looked like to others. He wasn’t sure what he looked like to himself. He looked like what his mother saw when she looked at him. But his mother had passed on. This raised a question for advanced students. What was left of him for others to see?” While the man in the gallery is

---

449 “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning,” from Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Screen 16, no. 3 (1975), 7.
450 DeLillo, Point Omega, 102.
451 DeLillo, Point Omega, 116.
452 DeLillo, Point Omega, 8.
contemplating these issues about seeing and being seen, Norman Bates stops watching the
woman undress because he remembers his mother. Her voice shames him, so that he returns to
her point of view, just as the man in the gallery transitions into thinking of his dead mother and
how she reflected him. Now that the mother is gone, he is uncertain who “sees” him, with the
sense of being understood, which reinforces the interpretation that the man in the gallery is like
Norman Bates with a psychotic identity tied to the dead mother. Without the mother, the man in
the gallery doubts whether there is anything of him for others to see, as if her mirroring is the
only possibility for his existence. He is subsumed by the mother figure just like Norman Bates.

Psychosis seems to limit subjects’ articulation of a personal narrative, because they
perceive powerful forces dictating the events of their life and limiting their possible behaviors.\(^\text{453}\) The psychosis can then take the route of escape by “construction of an alternative story and
alternative identity to replace the unbearable situation, caused by the subjugating story, in which
the individual is immersed.”\(^\text{454}\) The man steps away from the wall, away from the concrete world
to be assimilated into “the screen, where everything is so intensely what it is.”\(^\text{455}\)

The anonymous man’s limited engagement with others, and rejection of language, free
him to experience anything he chooses in relation to the silent work—including a psychotic
dissolution of his self. Engagement with this formalist, or abstract, representation collapses the
opposition between art and life, permitting him to shift into a new reality. Removing language,
which maintains a representational frame by narrating events, can “eventuate not in enhanced
purity and spiritual focus but in simple vacancy.”\(^\text{456}\) Gordon’s collapse of art into life in 24-Hour

\(^{453}\) Lysaker et al., “Narrative Incoherence in Schizophrenia: The Absent Agent-Protagonist and the Collapse of

\(^{454}\) Juha Holma and Jukka Aaltonen, “The Sense of Agency and the Search for a Narrative in Acute Psychosis.,”

\(^{455}\) DeLillo, Point Omega, 117.

Psycho leads the man in the gallery to collapse his life into Gordon’s art. There remains no distinction between art and life. The book ends.

THE MAN HIMSELF: THE PHARMAKON OF EXPERIENCE

Elster’s point that language and texts are dangerous because their false reality pretends to be real, presupposes that the spectator can no longer distinguish between art and life. Literature, art, and film are contrivances that minimize the enormity of being by shifting attention to a controlled and artificial narrative. They induct audiences into narrative structure rather than maintaining existential awe.

...There’s an endless counting down, he said. When you strip away all the surfaces, when you see into it, what’s left is terror. This is the thing that literature was meant to cure. The epic poem, the bedtime story.

“The film,” I said.457

Elster’s statement is given as a part of the narrative, not requiring the individualizing of quotation marks, which suggests the degree to which Finley, as narrator, has absorbed Elster’s ideas (though not as disastrously as the man in the gallery absorbs Norman Bates). Finley separates himself from Elster’s list by adding film, his own chosen medium. Literature, “the epic poem, the bedtime story,” was “meant to cure” the terror derived from looking into the abyss of eternity and realizing man’s finite span within that infinite extension.458 The consequent anxious need for meaning structures life into a story. Mankind’s fear of death, of annihilation, remains masked by language. Literature soothes the inchoate experience of life by composing life events into a story, rearranging data into a beginning, middle and end that satisfies narrative structure.

457 DeLillo, Point Omega, 45.
458 Much has been established to avoid this confrontation with time, shifting focus to the controlled chronology of the minute schedules that man has made—“dimwit time, inferior time, people checking watches and other devices” (DeLillo PO 45).
Elster perceives that literature keeps people from confronting the real and true presence, the gaping totality void of illusions, much as Socrates explains in his condemnation of literature in *The Republic*.

For Elster, literature is thus a palliative for fear, as well as a poison to the pensive path—the *pharmakon* of Derridean fame. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates leaves the city, his preferred place to think and work, for the quiet shade under a tree in the countryside, where Phaedrus offered to read Lysias’ speech on love, which Socrates calls a *pharmakon*, and which is available on a scroll, “speeches bound in books (*en biblios*).”[^459] The *pharmakon* is the *biblios*, establishing the first connection between writing and *pharmakon*. Derrida pursues an additional link through the myth Socrates shares: an Egyptian demi-god Theuth brings the king of the gods, his father, Thamus, a new invention that he calls writing (*gramata*); Theuth explains its usefulness as a “recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom.”[^460] Here, writing is directly associated with the *pharmakon*.

The term *pharmakon* is translated as recipe, which does not begin to cover the full scope of possibilities in the Greek word. Derrida acknowledges the incredible challenges of translation, particularly in such an instance where *pharmakon* means “the drug: the medicine and/or poison”—two very different concepts for the same term.[^461]

The malleable unity of this concept, or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable.


[^460]: Derrida, *Dissemination*, 75;

[^461]: Derrida, *Dissemination*, 70.
not only by the imprudence or empiricism of the translators, but first and foremost by the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation.462

Each translator selects the term that best suits their interpretation of the text, “rendering of the same word by ‘remedy,’ ‘recipe,’ ‘poison,’ ‘drug,’ ‘philter,’ etc.”463 These significant differences can completely alter how writing is understood. As a poison, it destroys. As a remedy, it cures. If Elster believes that the real life is an acknowledgment of eternal time, by facing the “terror” of man’s own finitude, then his remark that literature is a “cure” for that fear reveals literature to be a poison to the engagement he desires. Literature is double-edged.

Elster’s remark concludes a scene where his comments and Finley’s musings intertwine medicine and language in a combination that is strongly evocative of the notion of the pharmakon. Elster joins Finley on the deck of the house. He settles into a lengthy contemplation on his transcendent identity across space and time, from last night to this morning, from childhood to present age. Finley’s narrative thoughts interrupt Elster’s monologue to explain his understanding of Elster, even as Elster continues speaking.

“Before I fell asleep, eventually, was thinking when I was a small kid how I’d try to imagine the end of the century and what a far-off wonder that was and I’d figure out how old I’d be when the century ended, years, months, days, and now look, incredible, we’re here—we’re six years in and I realize that I’m the same skinny kid, my life shadowed by his presence, won’t step on cracks on the sidewalk, not as a superstition but as a test, a discipline, still do it. What else? Bites the skin off the edge of his thumbnail, always the right thumb, still do it, loose piece of dead skin, that’s how I know who I am.”

I’d looked once in the medicine cabinet in his bathroom. Didn’t have to open the cabinet door, there was no door. Ranks of bottles, tubes, pillboxes, nearly three shelves worth, and a few other bottles, one uncapped, on the lid of the toilet tank, and several printed inserts scattered on a bench, unfolded showing small bold cautionary typeface.464

462 Derrida, *Dissemination*, 71-2. Freud similarly notices opposite meanings in the word *heimlich* within his essay “The Uncanny.”
463 Derrida, *Dissemination*, 71.
What Finley finds in Elster’s medicine cabinet, “ranks of bottles, tubes, pillboxes, nearly three shelves worth,” as well as printed medical inserts, “showing small bold cautionary typeface,” introduces Elster as a list of formulas, a litany of medications with detailed applications. Elster identifies himself with habit and dead skin, products of his material existence. Finley finds Elster in the prescription bottles, supplements to his incarnation. Knowledge of the self in this passage of *Point Omega* is produced through the body and the pharmacy needed for that body.

Finley’s thoughts on written language, “small bold cautionary typeface,” seamlessly return to Elster’s monologue that rejects the printed words of his life.

“No books, lectures, conversations, none of that. It’s the goddamn hangnail, it’s the dead skin, that’s where I am, my life, there to here. I talk in my sleep, always did, my mother told me back then and I don’t need anyone to tell me now, I know it, I hear it, and this is more significant, somebody should make a study of what people say in their sleep and somebody probably has, some paralinguist, because it means more than a thousand personal letters a man writes in his lifetime and it’s literature as well.”

Elster rejects the signs of written language as representations of himself in favor of a materiality. This physical being is “dead,” but in that non-existence he finds his life. The skin that is dead contains Elster’s life, as it does scientifically too since the outer layers of skin are known to be dead cells and yet are necessary to wrap the living organism beneath.

His sleep-talking is also a way that he recognizes himself. Even if it occurs while he is unaware, he claims to know it happens. This unconscious speech is “more significant” than “a thousand personal letters a man writes in his lifetime and its literature as well,” where sleep-talking is the subconscious mutterings, the unreasoned articulations of the person, in contrast to

---

the intentional scribbling of the waking life. Sleep is the liminal space between life and death, where consciousness is no longer self-conscious but unconscious, or if dreaming, subconscious. The mutterings of the sleeper are the literature of the person when nearest to death, produced during the closest confrontation with the “terror” of life’s finite period. Sleep talking is speech ungoverned by reason, its chance element precisely like the Dada artists that Elster admired when Finley first approached him. Sleep-talking contains unexpected revelations, truths often ignored, and thus a reality that is, literally and literarily, dormant.

Finley’s narration intrudes on this discussion of a literature of the mind to return to a scripture of the body that is found within the medical cabinet. These supplements to Elster’s body are not seen as additions but as the man himself.

They weren’t all prescription drugs but most were and all of it was Elster. The lotions, tablets, capsules, suppositories, the pastes and gels and the bottles and tubes they came in and the labels, inserts and price stickers—all this was Elster, vulnerable, and maybe there’s supposed to be something morally degraded about my presence in the room but I didn’t feel guilty, only intent on knowing the man and all those accessories of being, the mood-shifting agents, the habit-forming agents that no one sees or tries to imagine. Not that these things were serious aspects of the true life he liked to refer to, the lost thoughts, the memories that range through decades, the dead skin on the thumb. Still, in a way, here he was in his medicine cabinet, the man himself, marked out clearly in drops, tablespoons and milligrams.⁴⁶⁶

The inserts indicate how to take the prescriptions, those drugs that require the doctor’s written authority to be disseminated. Elster exists thanks to these drugs, both literally in their life-promoting medicinal qualities, and metonymically as indicative of his presence. Elster’s personal pharmacy—the various drugs, lotions, pastes that he uses—define him for Finley. Even though Finley recognizes that Elster would reject them as obfuscating the “true life,” he still finds “in his

medicine cabinet, the man himself, marked out clearly in drops, tablespoons and milligrams,” quantifiably linguistic. Elster is complete and completely present in these medicines.

In this moment before the literature is discussed as a cure for existential terror, medicine is presented in its prescription form, which is the writing that sanctions the materialization of the patient’s drugs. The drugs are life-sustaining but also potentially life-annihilating, as Finley realizes in the final chapter of the Elster and Finley story when Finley worries that Elster’s grief over his daughter’s disappearance might lead to suicide by ingesting too many pills.\textsuperscript{467} The cautions that accompany the medicines explain how to use the drugs productively, but also warn how they may be abused. The \textit{pharmakon} is present as both cure and danger. The word is literature and medicine, physical and intellectual.

The labels and inserts are there to remind patients how to use the medicine effectively but in so doing also acknowledge the possible means of abuse. Literature is not simply a beneficent cure for memory as Thoth suggests in Socrates’ myth. The King disputes Thoth’s claim by arguing that, as a substitute for memory, it also destroys memory by no longer requiring knowledge of the original—that is made irrelevant by the availability of the written reference. The doctor is no longer there to oversee and circumscribe how the drugs are taken; the writing speaks instead, with endless room for interpretation.

As Derrida explains, the fear is that the origin that gave writing its meaningfulness will no longer be valued because the writing becomes a substitute for the original knowledge or speech.\textsuperscript{468} Socrates tells Phaedrus that “Lysias himself is here present” in the form of the written speech, the \textit{pharmakon}, but then will dispute this as a false presence.\textsuperscript{469} The text “substitutes the

\textsuperscript{467} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 85.
\textsuperscript{468} Derrida, \textit{Dissemination}, 77-81.
\textsuperscript{469} Plato, “Phaedrus” in \textit{Dialogues}, 228e.
breathless sign for the living voice, claims to do without the father (who is both living and life-giving) of logos, and can no more answer for itself than a sculpture or inanimate painting.”^470 A strong textual argument can offer no more than what is printed to enforce itself.

Lysias is not there to speak and argue the points so that knowledge can develop across a dialogue. The document pretends Lysias is present by offering itself as a representation, just as the prescription “speaks” for the doctor’s authority. That remove is what constitutes the artificial presence, a falsification of true being: “the pharmaceutical remedy is essentially harmful because it is artificial.”^471 Socrates’ argument against the written document revolves around the fact that it is an imitation of the speaker’s presence. The document’s seeming presence is an artificial presence as the one who speaks is absent and cannot continue the discussion. Dialogue cannot occur; truth cannot be sought.

Elster does not want to participate in the documentary because then his words will be encapsulated by Finley. The conversation will occur not with Elster, but with the film that annihilates the fullness of Elster’s experience, in favor of a brief summation of his thoughts. Elster knows that to tell his story is to package the real life that happened to him into a neat narrative, but that representation of experience is inherently false to him. The patrilinear path demands an origin that is the core of truth, with all else secondary. Elster maintains that his life is the origin and what is real, while his description of events on film would become a reduction.

Socrates’ argument and Elster’s understanding posit the text (Lysias’ speech or the documentary) as only existing in relation to the original speaker, its author. Even more dangerous, then, is to consider the document not as an artifice but as its own entity, a substitute

---

^470 Derrida, *Dissemination*, 92.
for the author. In such a case, as Derrida explains, the document eliminates its progenitor, enables the death of the author, the king, the father, enacting that most foul familial murder, condemned from the beginning of time. As a cure to memory and a gift of longevity, the pharmakon is false, offering a simulacrum; alternatively, in permitting representation, the pharmakon is a poison that denigrates and destroys the origin and the real.

Renditions at Work

This entire system relies on “reading” texts ("the epic poem, the bedtime story. “The film”") as representations, where the only true presence exists in the embodiment and speech of the origin, the father, the king. There is one reality, one origin from which all is derived. Thamus offers his father a false form of eternal presence. The document is derivative of what the origin presented. The text is forced into reiteration, thereby re-presenting, a secondary, imitative, child. Such a belief structure is established by the God of Gods, the speaker, the origin to whom writing is offered and rejected as not equal to Himself. Writing must be valued by that source to be valuable in this system, and the source explains why writing is inadequate. Writing, the pharmakon, cannot be its own entity because the speaker insists that it is a derivative of his origin. The derivative cannot be independent lest it replace the father speaker.

Elster, Finley, and the man in the gallery seek an origin rather than representation because representation is an illusion, an artifice. They desire immediate presence. Representation is avoided in order to better comprehend, or apprehend, life’s vast presentation. Language complicates such pure being by defining the parameters of experience. Ironically, the silent man in the gallery speaks for all of them when he explains that he wants “[T]o see what’s here, finally
to look and to know you’re looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what’s happening in the smallest registers of motion.”

Elster wants to “[B]are everything to plain sight. See what is there.” Stripping everything to its elements, Elster believes he is present in the unconscious habits of his life because consciousness is deceiving, constructed rather than natural. Language is a conscious act, and Elster is all too familiar with its manipulative nature. Working for the government, he was “there to conceptualize, his word, to apply overarching ideas and principles...He’d exchanged all that for space and time.” In his new life he wants “a sublime transformation of mind and soul or some worldly convulsion”—the Omega Point of Pierre de Chardin.

Elster no longer wishes to speak, in order to become closer to “all this” rather than the conceptualizing of the world that he was doing for the government. By getting away from the “advertising slogans” that would “yield pictures eventually and then become three dimensional” Elster hoped to avoid the simulacrum of his conceptual government work, and get closer to reality. Avoiding concepts to focus on form would free the mind from its signifying ties. For Elster, form was the prescription of haiku: “It’s human consciousness set in nature...Bare everything to plain sight,” as if seeing were a direct correlation to “reality.” Elster’s focus on the forms of empirical experience seeks a non-signifying universe. When his daughter disappears without a trace, no explanation can be developed. There are no signs to make sense of what has

472 DeLillo, Point Omega, 6.
473 DeLillo, Point Omega, 29.
474 DeLillo, Point Omega, 19.
475 DeLillo, Point Omega, 72. Elster briefly mentions Chardin in the book. Don DeLillo was raised Catholic and admits that those teachings continue to enter his writing, “in ways I can’t be specific about—the sense of ceremony, the sense of last things, and the sense of religion as almost at times an art,” Alexandra Alter, “Don DeLillo on Point Omega and His Writing Methods - WSJ.com,” Wall Street Journal, (January 30, 2010), http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704094304575029673526948334.html
476 DeLillo, Point Omega, 44.
477 DeLillo, Point Omega, 29.
happened; no narrative is possible. The uncertainty of whether she was kidnapped, murdered, chose to abandon him or metaphorically vanished leaves Elster speechless. Mieke Bal explains how all subjects “connect the sign to a possible meaning” by always applying the same, agreed-upon set of rules that are neither subjective nor universal, but rather “the most objective,” which ensures “that all members of a group adhere to them. Without such rules, the subject would be psychotic, unable to communicate.”

A refusal to participate or an inability to make connections reduces the audience into a “psychotic” uncommunicative recluse.

The collapse of his life into art for the man in the gallery makes him psychotic, a literary analogy to Bal’s point. The man in the gallery finds reality in Douglas Gordon’s work because “this film had the same relationship to the original movie that the original movie had to real lived experience. This was the departure of the departure. The original movie was fiction, this was real.” The man in the gallery has interpreted real as “departure of the departure,” which is a similar type of linguistic manipulation to the one Elster performs in his study of renditions. A departure from reality is a fiction and a yet further departure can then be interpreted either as a return to reality, or as a further remove.

Baudrillard understood “departure from the departure” as such a further remove, which becomes the experience of the simulacrum, wherein humanity lives in an entirely mediated projection with no access to reality. Simulation adopts some of the characteristics of the “reality principle” and so “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and false’, between ‘real’ and

---

478 Mieke Bal et al., “Art History and Its Theories,” *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 1 (1996), 6-7. Bal explains how the field of semiotics applies to a work of art, a film, through a five step process she derives from C.S. Pierce. A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity: “1) It addresses somebody, that is, 2) it creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, 3) or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. 4) The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen.”

imaginary.” Baudrillard differentiates between simulation and representation: representation denies simulation as false, while simulation engulfs representation to produce a simulacrum that creates images bearing no relation to reality. Nostalgia becomes extreme, such as Elster presents while at the cabin, there hoping “to reclaim the body from what he called the nausea of News and Traffic.”

Finley refuses to consider the narrative that will develop across the documentary, how it will be perceived as a sign, to be rendered by audiences. So long as Finley can deny his participation in the documentary, he can refuse to consider its artifice. At the very least, he believes he can reduce artifice to irrelevance by having Elster speak without interference, where the film will tell the truth because without any impeding ideology or concepts, Elster will be presented as real. For Finley, the film’s seeming reality is based on “nothing planned, nothing rehearsed, no elaborate setup, no conclusions in advance, this is completely sort of barefaced, uncut.” Only at the end does he begin to realize that the film would show “a flawed character in a chamber drama, justifying his war and condemning the men who made it,” rather than offering the complex, irresolvable Elster. Simply by producing the documentary, Finley has created a character and a drama of Elster and Elster’s life.

The collapse of art into life, of life into art, of concept into form, form into concept, eliminates any sign system. The dissolution of signs means no signifier/signified, whose rhetoric can be questioned. Pure experience gels life into the traumatic stasis of psychosis.

---

481 ibid., 5.
482 DeLillo, Point Omega, 18.
483 DeLillo, Point Omega, 53.
484 DeLillo, Point Omega, 99.
Loss of language does not just eliminate fictional narratives, but any constitutive analysis of life. The act of narrating distances the speaker from experience by creating an outlook that can select events out of experience and connect them through some form of association. That narrative distance takes the speaker out of the present moment, but also allows perspective, self-reflection, and self-narration, which lack has been linked to schizophrenia. Maintaining awareness of how each narrative is framed acknowledges a current of artificiality.

Rather than straining between reality and illusion, the act of interpretation stations us to negotiate both. We operate within the pharmakon, where our sense perceptions are understood through the process of rendition. What art reveals is the fictionality that is ever present in our narratives of reality. Rejecting artifice and illusion as shadowy figures intimates that the bright light of reality should dominate. A singular absolute vision, however, in its rejection of multiple narrative strands is psychotic. We live in the shadow space between the light of reason and reality and the darkness of utter artifice. As the literary scholar Joshua Landy said, alluding to Nietzsche: “happiness in life is as much truth as you can stand, whatever illusion you can’t live without, and an awareness of that deception.”

In Arthur Danto’s preface to Transfiguration of the Commonplace, he explains how frames, quotes, display cases, and stages are conventions that allow us to discern that what is being presented is not “real” because “the difference in the end between art and reality is less a difference in kinds of things than in kinds of attitudes, and hence not a matter of what we relate

---

486 Landy , CUNY Graduate Center Keynote Speech for Comparative Literature Conference Impression and Object, March 28, 2014.
to but how we relate to it.” These distancing devices indicate the expectation of a shift in attitude to “contrast with what is designated a practical attitude.” Eliminating the framing device that separates art and reality simply makes art a real thing; if the art is supposed to be perceived as maintaining some element of artifice then some framing device needs to be reinstated. We cannot express a direct experience of reality, either internally or with another, as we cannot describe our experience without a narrative, which require adopting framing devices. When life is exclusively turned into art, life becomes a map for art so that the real becomes an artificial reference point, inverting all sense. An ideological conviction of what art should do in order to alter or improve life likewise cancels the distance between art and reality. A commitment to any one thing is a choice to stagnate instead of responding to the material presented by negotiating a constantly shifting attitude. The collapse of the distance between art and life is annihilation rather than an approach to presence.

Art may need to be framed in order to be recognized as such, but reality needs to be confirmed by others. Jessie’s disappearance cannot be confirmed as any specific act and so her absence is unreal and cannot be reasonably discussed. The man in the gallery notices how viewers glance at the guard for guidance in how to see the silent flickering screen. They want confirmation, but the guard was there to be “unseen,” and without any guide to the experience they do not try to create distance to it through observation, but leave and ignore its presence. The anonymous narrator claims that “the guard purified the occasion, made it finer and rarer” because his silent presence stages the significance of the works, and accords them reverential

value since they need to be protected from the general population.\textsuperscript{491} Art and reality are distanced lest the mass touch or tear the venerable works. The man in the gallery even wishes that the guard carried a gun since that “would clarify the act of seeing for the benefit of everyone.”\textsuperscript{492} There are rules that govern how we see and these are enforced, albeit with the pretense that these guards are not there. Art and reality are distanced from one another, but by force. The viewer is positioned in relationship to the art rather than negotiating that relationship on her own, and discovering perhaps greater complications in this space between art and the real.

Derrida mentions in his analysis of Socrates’ Egyptian tale that Theuth is not only the son of Thamus, but also found in some myths to be Thamus’ brother. This dual identity is helpful here to reconsider the \textit{pharmakon}. Perhaps, it can be both a son and derivation, and a distinct equal. Like an artist’s rendition of another work of art, it is both a copy and its own artifact. Being the product of another does not negate being individual. All three characters seek a singular reality by minimizing their engagement in life. Rather than struggling with the complexities of interpretation and managing the possible variants, each character in \textit{Point Omega} seeks a reality where truth originates. The dichotomy of origin and representation means they have no alternative but to deny the false representation and seek the real origin. As Bal explains, there is no means by which the object itself (or reality) can be apprehended.\textsuperscript{493} Everything is interpreted. This interpretation should not be called a representation, which term is used in the mimetic arguments that describe it as a copy of an original. Instead, conceiving of the interpretation as a rendition creates a new space where the subject and object encounter one

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{491} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 102. \\
\textsuperscript{492} DeLillo, \textit{Point Omega}, 112. \\
\textsuperscript{493} Mieke Bal et al., “Art History and Its Theories,” \textit{The Art Bulletin} 78, no. 1 (1996): 6
\end{flushright}
another, the call and response of their engagement layer into a dialogue, creating a shifting but therefore widening terrain that requires the spectator to reassess constantly the situation.

Working with renditions need not make us dissolve into a fear of inauthenticity. Certainly one aspect of any rendition is its derivative relationship, potentially understood as inauthentic and unoriginal. The flip side of the coin, however, is a rendition defined without reference to other versions, or aspects, which somehow does not seem to be a more “real” understanding of the term. The reality that Baudrillard summoned has never been so near to the human experience as he, or any philosopher, suggested, and inclines me to see some of his cautions (many of which are well-pointed) as a nostalgia for that which has never been, a yearning for some Edenic space where reality is affirmed in a mutual existence with the One, the Father, and hints uncomfortably at the “waves of sameness” that Deleuze and Guattari warned could lead to racist (that is ideological) tendencies. If language and art were not understood as representing one another, then the tension between the two could rest, and both could be renditions of an ineffable life.
SECTION IV
THE WRITING ON THE WALL:
TATE MODERN’S “BIGGER PICTURE” CAPTION PROJECT

Oliver  I think you’re getting confused here—all we want to do is look at an ordinary picture of something and understand it.
Jimmy  Ne fancy stuff about the meaning of meaning—just straightforward...art appreciation.
Lyon  But this is Art Appreciation.
Harry  But we want to knaa the secret behind what’s gannin’ on.
Lyon  But there are no secrets—it’s all there in front of you.
George  But there must be a secret to it.
Lyon  Of course there’s not.
Young Lad Well, if there’s not a secret—how come we divvint knaa what’s gannin’ on?
-excerpt from The Pitmen Painters by Lee Hall
CHAPTER IV.1

THE WRITING ON THE WALL AT TATE MODERN

From Clark to DeLillo, I have slowly stepped away from something recognizable as art writing, or an adherent of the art world. The intention has been to show how the concerns of art history and theory can appear in writings that differ from the traditional form of the discourse. How we engage art can say a great deal about us, as Swann showed. The acknowledgment of our own experience with art can transform not only how we see the work of art, but how and what we think about the specific art object and art in general. This change is perceived as being a detriment to art and the discipline of its study, and it undoubtedly could be, just as anything done badly is disappointing. Tate Modern offers us an opportunity to examine how a major art institution adopts a radical attitude towards its own objects. As the arts in general shift from a focus on institutional membership to developing new audiences through community engagement, new ways of presenting the art become necessary. Not only are new curatorial displays necessary but so are alternate ways of discussion. Tate Modern’s caption project Bigger Picture is an example of such a new dialogue.

In 2000, when Tate Modern opened in London, art critics from around the world swarmed to see how the old Bankside Power Station had been transformed into a contemporary art setting. The space and the work were all under scrutiny, with mixed reviews regarding how the works were displayed, so different from Tate Britain. Tate Modern, like Tate Britain, is an
example of a “universal survey museum”—a large municipal or national museum whose primary mission is to provide a survey of either classical works, old masters and modern art, or provide a survey of the transitions across the development of modern art and into contemporary works.494 One small project got virtually no notice though it remains one of the more significant changes made in museum presentation. Some works received not one caption but two; one provided the traditional information about the work and artist, while the second offered a personal reaction or a creative response from a public figure in Great Britain. Choosing to have traditional captions and subjective captions provides the requisite art history lesson while also encouraging a personal experience that cannot be scripted by the museum. Some visitors may feel daunted by so much text, but this dual approach contextualizes the work and offers a more creative experience.

The Bigger Picture caption project is an innovative approach to the challenge of how language can or should present artifacts whose dominant mode is visual: the project invites well-known cultural figures and experts in non-art fields, as well as community participants and volunteers, to respond to a work in Tate Modern’s collection. They write a brief personal caption to be displayed, alongside the traditional caption, beside their chosen artwork. This is unorthodox for a government-funded, not-for-profit, public institution with an international stature. Wall text is usually circumscribed by a long list of requirements, most of which are aimed at eliminating any signs of personality.

Wall text appears as a part of the transition from private collections for an elite audience to public museums showing art for a general audience with potentially no knowledge of the

works and artists on display. Collections began with curiosity cabinets where the collectors themselves would guide friends, and others on social par with the host, through a private tour. Inventories provided listings to disseminate information to other collectors, but it was not until collections became public that curators were needed to develop explanations of the artifacts.\footnote{Ingrid Schaffner, “Wall Text, 2003/6 Ink on Paper Courtesy the Author,” in \textit{What Makes a Great Exhibition?}, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia, PA : Chicago, IL: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage ; University of Chicago Press, 2006), 156.}

The works were displayed in accordance with the Enlightenment’s categorizing approach to knowledge, and the shift in governance that occurred at the end of the 18th century: separate fields with methodologies particular to each discipline, within the purview of specialists. Art works were divided into national styles to support the newly conceived boundaries of nation states, and art historical periods to delineate a timeline of progress. The art expert in charge of the Belvedere proclaimed that the museum was meant as “a repository where the history of art is made visible.”\footnote{Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 455.} A similar program existed at the Uffizi, and one was established at the Louvre in 1810. Other museums followed the pattern thereafter, and continue to do so.


The art historian Geoffrey Batchen explains how art history is powerful, precisely through a seemingly objective approach for an organized design within the museum. Pictures scattered randomly throughout rooms “makes no sense” because the Enlightenment ideology frames our cultural expectations, limiting the appeal of such chaos.\footnote{The National Gallery in London for a while had a program where it invited artists “to go through its collection and put together, for example, a Vermeer next to a Mondrian, next to a Chardin” though Richard Sennett thinks the public would resist such a radical departure in collection displays if not offered as a special show done by a famed artist (Dercon 137).}

\footnote{495}
chronological and geographic organization for art, but it arose only two hundred years ago with museums. In 1785, an aristocratic connoisseur objected to the new organization that the Belvedere’s art expert had established: “one who desires an art history can enter [the museum] but the sensitive man is kept away.” The “sensitive man” desires a viewing experience independent of the museum’s didactic art history, and thus appears the split between aesthetic sensitivity and political engagement. The art historical agenda transformed art works into representations of a period in time, a nation’s progress, its influence and authority.

The first European public art museums were established out of private, noble collections. The new institutions necessarily “would inherit some of the ceremonial functions of the princely collection,” incorporating the power tied to the nobleman’s grandeur. The works’ value as representations of individual greatness for the princes got transferred into the museum collection as a repository of the nation state’s cultural significance. At the turn of the 18th century, viewers were suddenly no longer a cultured aristocracy but often citizens of the recently defined nation-states, who were expected to appreciate art as a source of cultural knowledge. Civilization came to be identified with high culture, “and high culture was taken as tangible evidence of virtuous government.” The visitor to the art works is no longer subordinate to the excellencies of the prince, but is “addressed as a citizen and therefore a

---

500 The man, sensitive and cultured, was the presumed audience for art, despite many important female patrons and collectors throughout history. Collectors such as Peggy Gugenheim and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney established in the 20th century that women too could be sensitive viewers of art, and scholars such as Linda Nochlin have helped ensure that conversations around art are sensitive to both.
501 The European aristocratic background for museums rests on a cultural hierarchy that is slightly different in the United States, but also remarkably similar. American museums “unencumbered by ties to aristocratic households anchored their missions from the beginning in the edification of the public,” that is “the elevation of public taste” up to the standards of the museum and its board, thereby reestablishing the hierarchical dynamic of its European counterparts (McCarthy Oondatje 10).
502 Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 452. The other place where art could be found was temples and churches, imbuing art in general with the reverence and awe associated with gods and greater power. See Duncan and Wallach Tk, Lee and Henning A Portrait of the Visual Arts 1975, 9.
shareholder of the state.”

The museum provides the illusion of a classless state in which all citizens have equal portion of the spiritual wealth, but class, gender, and cultural background alter the ability to accept or adopt what is offered. The museum “prompts the visitor to identify with an elite culture at the same time that it spells out his place in the social hierarchy.”

The museum cannot avoid its position as authority. The categories of genre, period, nation, style, among others, helped delineate a coherent story of progress, which museums impose on their audiences.

In order to subjugate a viewer, the art museum must sustain the (appearance of) coherence of its discourse, projecting illusions of cultural order amid the experience of fragmentation and disorientation of modern life.

Labels established the value of the works on display by explaining the art historical information to those citizens who might not have the education to recognize or understand works in the museum. Reinforcing political notions of stability during a time of great dissent is work that labels still do.

Wall text, therefore, exists largely for three reasons: 1) as an identifying “tombstone” that lists the work’s producer, title, date, materials and occasionally dimensions; 2) to instruct an audience who lacks, or desires additional, art historical knowledge; 3) to communicate the meaning or intention of the work because it is seen as incapable of doing that on its own. These reasons make wall text a vital part of any exhibition. Museum curators and education

---

507 Curators would even do on-site explanations, a task that has been relegated now to knowledgable guides.
508 This was true during the revolutionary period at the turn of the 19th century, and just as much during the Cold War when the United States supported abstract expressionism as an example of the freedom that democracy offered in contrast to the restrictions of the Soviet Union, as Lauren Ross explains in her article “When art fought the Cold War” for The Art Newspaper.
departments struggle with what the text should achieve, as well as the text’s physical presence, didactic ideology, and tone.

Great Britain has a history of trying to manage the text accompanying art. In 1857, the British House of Commons declared that all national museums were required to provide, alongside works of art, objects of science, or artifacts of historical interest, “a brief Description thereof, with the view of conveying useful Information to the Public, and of sparing them the expense of a Catalogue” (Schaffne 157). Wall text, in this instance, not only has a pedagogical value but is an attempt to circumvent the economic disparity that might prevent some visitors from enjoying the show’s intended message. In the 1890s, various attempts to standardize the types of descriptions led to a series of reports by the Museum Association. One recommended a uniform three hundred words to explain basic topics. This met with resistance because it would turn the walls into “textbooks.” The concern about language overpowering art, and being excessively didactic, was already present.

The next significant addition to the history of wall text addressed the style of these captions. In 1927, Laurence Vail Coleman wrote a manual for small American museums, identifying two types of viewers: aesthetes who wanted a sensory experience of art and intellectuals who sought information. He recommended therefore producing brief labels that could blend into the wall, with additional information in gallery leaflets. A geology curator at the

---

509 Worker’s movements have been strong in Great Britain. Chartism emerges in the late 1830s as one of the first revolutionary worker’s movements. Engels’ The Condition of the Working Class in England is published in 1845, and Marx and Engels visit England together later that year. As a representative of the London Committee of the League of the Just, Joseph Moll visited Marx and Engels in 1847, urging them to take part in the reorganization of the committee, which would become the Communist League during the June 2-9, 1847 Congress, when it also adopts the motto Engels and Marx recommend: “Working Men of the World, Unite!” The Second Congress later that year requests the two men to draw up a manifesto, which is published in February 1848, the infamous Manifesto for the Communist Party. In 1849, both Marx and Engels move to London, where they would both die many years later. The people’s needs were argued in political dialogue of the time.

510 Ironically, the debate about wall text greatly increased the literature on the topic. Less language around art led inevitable to more words about it.
National Museum of Wales, F.J. North wrote a manual that acknowledged how his recommendations on labels for “winkles and lions” might not be apt for art, but made general recommendations on the dissemination of museum scholarship. His 1957 guide remains a source for major art institutions.

Ingrid Schaffner, Chief Curator at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, chronicles the use of wall text in an essay for _Questions of Practice: What Makes a Great Exhibition?_ Most museums have guidelines for wall text that explain the expected style and types of wall text. Guidelines usually include parameters on applying foreign language terms, using technical descriptors, or referencing other works. Permitted lengths may vary depending on the form the wall text is expected to take; Schaffner wittily notes that “an active voice and short sentences are one way to avoid inducing mental collapse on the gallery floor.” The tensions that surround how language relates to art are perhaps nowhere so dear as when the language is proximate.

In _The Value of Art_, Michael Findlay, the art historian and Aquavella gallerist, bemoans the degree to which museum audiences read wall text rather than look at the art. In the chapter “Perception Trumps Information,” he suggests looking at one work in a show for ten minutes rather than rushing through, but barely seeing, all of them. He understands why there cannot be more benches but wishes there were a way to encourage visitors to take their time in front of a work of art. Amy Whitaker in _Museum Legs_ shares the research conducted by art critic Blake Gopnik who sat on a museum bench and watched visitor interactions.

Average time spent reading the educational wall text: fifty seconds

---

511 Schaffner’s essay is an excellent summary of the history of wall text; she is witty, erudite, yet brief. Fuller discussions can be found in Tk and TK.

Average time spent looking at a work of art: four seconds
Maximum time spent looking at a work of art: eight seconds
Minimum time spent looking at a work of art: zero seconds by a woman who came in, took almost a minute to read the wall text, then walked out again without a single glance at any of the pictures hanging there.  

Studies show that museum attendees look at works of art between 2 seconds and 32.5 seconds. The Louvre found that viewers look at the Mona Lisa for an average of 15 seconds, while a study conducted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art found the median viewing time was 17 seconds, with larger groups spending more time than others. Such brief appreciation raises questions about the art’s relevancy to viewers. The text clearly dominates the visual experience, but perhaps because the text is written to explain the art and provide the art work’s meaning. The declarative language may lead readers to believe they know the work, thereby allowing them a cursory glance at the picture. Whitaker wonders if spending so much time on the text exhausts viewers’ capacity to engage the works of art. For this reason, some suggest that wall text should be entirely eliminated.

Another argument for eliminating text is based on the label’s visual disruption to a curator’s careful art arrangement. Alfred A. Barnes refused to have labels in his personal gallery, the Barnes Foundation, now located in Philadelphia, preferring an information sheet in each room that viewers could choose to read but would not interrupt his careful wall arrangements. Robert Storr, while at the Museum of Modern Art, removed the small labels next to each work, positioning them in groups at the far end of the wall where the works were displayed. Longer

---

explanations were separated from the works altogether and placed on a short wall or column, often removed from the wall where the art was displayed.516 As FJ North wrote, “in whatever direction there may be differences of opinion, it will be agreed that the label must look good.”517 The label must blend, disappear, or provide a visual statement of its own.

The obligations surrounding the label become evident in a section of Schaffner’s essay titled, “What should a label say?” The auxiliary “should” indicates the conditional expectations surrounding wall text, even when guided to support museum viewers. The standard labels have been written to be educational, and audiences mostly expect that they can learn about the art and artist by reading them. Museum attendees read words organized and designed to impart information; the museum has granted its authority to the curator or interpretation team to represent an idea (whether historical, biographical, aesthetic, theoretical or some combination), which the viewer is expected to grasp. The curator of the show, whether at a gallery or museum, has a design for the show, which is made visible on the walls and affirms the mission of the museum.518 The spectator reads the label and learns about the work, but also the institution’s didactic ideology.

The pedagogical efforts of wall text are also sometimes criticized. In an article for the art magazine Frieze, Tom Morton points out that while a museum’s efforts to educate “is a fine thing, it is not the only or even the primary purpose of an exhibition—just as one does not edit a novel to teach the reader about the novelist...neither does one curate an artist’s work with a pedagogical intent.” Wall text can enrich the experience: “Why is this exciting or profound? not

518 Who writes the wall text is an issue in any art space. Education Departments in a museum often provide courses and helpful guides to guests of the museum who seek more information. Though educators can undoubtedly write about art, Schaffner insists that curators ought not relinquish their creative control over the exhibitions’ narrative.
What can this teach me?”

Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for The New Yorker, said that exhibitions are filled with “patronizing wall texts, the babble of Acoustiguides, and other evidence of marketing and education.” For these critics, art in the museum should not have the pat moralizing of a fable, but offer the opportunity for new thought.

Lastly, the style of wall text, explanatory or otherwise also provokes dissent. Many critics, who are themselves often students of art history and theory, find the use of complex, hyper-intellectual “buzzwords (appropriation, Baudelarian, post-conceptual)” self-satisfied and inaccessible. Various critics bemoan the “lack of both rigor and regard paid exhibition wall text, which has become, like wallpaper, something of a dreary necessity, taken for granted even by the curators that write them.” Tom Morton wondered why “so many museum and gallery wall texts are so reductive, so intellectually unambitious, so badly written, and so physically intrusive” when these texts exist in theory “to make the viewer—any viewer—want to look at the work again.” Roberta Smith, a leading art critic writing for The New York Times, seems dismayed for the artists who “cannot be blamed for the labels written about their work,” and remorseful for viewers who are “left with next to nothing, other than a depressing hollowness.” Wall text as such has many pitfalls. It can be ugly, pedantic, badly written, boring, obvious, unambitious, dreary, just to name a few complaints.

519 Schaffner, “Wall Text,” 166.
521 Curatorial programs in schools are often divisive on the issue of whether wall text should be an area of study for students. Seeing wall text as visually intrusive, and then worse intellectually narrowing, some programs eliminate that curriculum from a future curator’s education.
If some find text a detraction from the art, or at best an inconvenience, choosing to eliminate text indicates that “other assumptions are being made, which also need to be read critically.” When art is believed to “speak” for itself, and not require wall text, often the critic is not taking into consideration the ideas and education that she takes for granted. Specific knowledge of practices and ideas can be helpful for many viewers: “In contemporary art where so much depends on knowledge of issues around politics, theories, histories and images, wall text can help the viewer gain the basics to work with the show.” Conceptual art’s intellectual and linguistic aspects are not necessarily aided by removing textual support. Eliminating these helpful texts can limit audiences, reproducing the elitist divisions that the artist, the work, or even the critic are trying to dismantle.

In today’s multi-cultural and international world, a common knowledge base cannot be presumed. Most museums write for a college-educated audience who has not studied art, and so the texts are meant to be available for those who have a general knowledge of liberal studies but are not specialists. Those who are experts can be reminded and focused on one idea, while those for whom the material is entirely new can be provided with initial concepts and stories to contextualize the work’s relevance and interest. Though some visitors may be familiar with certain art historical ideas or theories, many will arrive at the museum with an entirely different frame of reference and desire assistance or guidance in interpreting the works.

Such information is given in anonymous wall texts, which represent the unquestioned institutional voice. The aorist tense, often used for example, describes an action impersonally,

---

525 Schaffner, “Wall Text,” 156.
527 Schaffner, “Wall Text,” 158.
since it has no temporal relation.\textsuperscript{528} The text carries the weight of being true outside and beyond time, which helps establish the universal significance of the work. The selected content is designed to influence readers in a certain direction—one deemed historically significant to the value of the work and reason for its display and subsequent admiration. The show, curator, or museum will emphasize some ideas about the work in favor of others.\textsuperscript{529}

Only those with extensive knowledge about the work, the artist, or the time period are likely to feel comfortable disagreeing with an authoritative statement such as wall text provides. The caption’s mere presence reinforces its significance. The visual disruption of the caption signals its importance. If text is placed next to the work, then the ideas included must be important, or perhaps necessary, to interpreting the work’s meaning. In addition, the authoritative voice of the wall text promotes an ideology that established interpretations exist to the exclusion of individual input. Tate Modern’s caption program Bigger Picture is one attempt at moderating the unconditional authority of the label by including alternate points of view alongside the useful traditional label.

Notable figures such as the author A.S. Byatt or musician and producer Brian Eno have produced Bigger Picture captions, but so have Tate program participants and volunteer gallery guides. The array of writers include those who are knowledgeable about the canon of art, as well as relative newcomers. Participants are invited to select two or three works about which they care to write. Submissions are edited down to no more than 150 words for a prose paragraph or 90

\textsuperscript{528} Words may be used either to place a depicted scene at one temporal moment or to make the temporal position of a scene ambiguous in a temporally polysemous picture. Because the aorist tense narrates an action impersonally, a picture using words in that tense has no particular temporal relation to the spectator” (Carrier 190).
\textsuperscript{529} Conversations with curators clarify, however, that some information is excluded due to space limitation.
words for a poem, and sent for approval to the author. The brief personal responses range from humorous reactions, to poetic explorations, to art historical tidbits that the writer somehow knows. This variety of approaches shows the multiple ways viewers can engage, encouraging viewers to feel the same freedom in their own interpretations.

After its initial set of captions in 2000, the Bigger Picture caption project stalled until 2008 when Minnie Scott revived the project, often by using published excerpts from the *Tate Magazine*. The project is currently enthusiastically led by Corinne Scott, who has been involved with Tate Modern since adolescence when she was a leader in the young members group, Tate Collective. In a 2013 interview, Scott explained that interpretation is an open arena, where multiple opinions and experiences can be applied to art, and often should be. She has many ideas for the project to reach and engage an ever wider audience and as such is breathing new life into the project’s possible extension of the museum’s mission “to promote public understanding and enjoyment of British, modern and contemporary art,” as the website and the museum’s informational materials make clear.

Tate Modern includes an Interpretation Department where the caption project Bigger Picture has been placed, instead of the separate Education Department that focuses on self-consciously pedagogic programs. This distinction is particular to Tate. Most museums only have an Education Department where all museum text is produced, managed, and overseen. Exhibition text is passed between the curatorial and educational departments, but the tensions between the design and pedagogy become quickly evident. The Curatorial, Interpretation, and

---

530 The Bigger Picture staff is adamant that they do not alter content, and try to retain style. Space limitations require reducing some submissions, but the approval process with the author aims to ensure that the final edited version retains the sense and spirit of the original submission.

531 Interview with Corinne Scott. TK

532 Tate, Bigger Picture Summary 10-16-2012.
Education departments all work together (along with other museum departments as needed) at Tate Modern, but the recognition that interpretation and education are separate approaches to the art experience is a major step away from the typical museum authority.

As previously discussed, most labels are meant to support the curator’s concept for the show, or to explain the work’s importance and presence in the museum collection. Bigger Picture captions, however, are not produced with the goals designated for wall text. Bigger Picture offers “different ways of reading works from a mixture of disciplines and viewpoints,” as the museum summary explains. Alongside the traditional information museum caption, an alternate discourse skews the notion that art has one meaning. The tone of a Bigger Picture caption simulates natural speech, revealing a sympathetic viewer not unlike the reader, though perhaps with different interests or viewpoints.

As an extension of this individualism, the Bigger Picture captions include the author’s name in order to eliminate the power of anonymity—in this case the authority of “Tate Modern”—to select relevant information for viewers. Identifying the author permits audiences to challenge the information, because a name personalizes and therefore undermines the unquestionable authority present in anonymity. Even a knowledgeable curator, who is likely an expert on the subject, is still “an individual whose scholarship can be engaged with and challenged, not just accepted as institutional gospel.” Recognizing that the museum works have been selected by a specific curator with a particular sensibility or style allows the

---

533 Tate, Bigger Picture Summary 10-16-2012.
The interpretive choice on display to become (more) apparent. Viewers can then adopt this perspective, if they choose, understanding that alternatives likely exist.

Though the audience is important, Schaffner reminds her reader that the traditional label should not forget the art.

Labels should talk to the viewer and to the art simultaneously. They should be written knowing that the art is there in front of the viewers, who are already engaged enough by what they see to want, not only to know more, but also to see more. Imagine the labels as part of a three-way switch: from looking at the art, to reading the label, which points back to the art.

Schaffner creates a triangle relationship among the expert critic who has written the text, the spectator who is attending the museum, and the work of art that has caused these two behaviors. Attempts to learn and understand the work must not forget to return to the work, as a part of the dialogue. Though Duchamp focused on the role of the spectator in “The Creative Act,” his argument also identified these three personalities. Duchamp’s goal was to assert the importance of the spectator, but arguments about art viewership, and taste, have always been concerned with subjectivity, which Kant hoped to distance in his Critique of Judgment. For Schaffner the work of art should remain central to the spectator’s discussion. Some of the Bigger Picture captions do deviate into other considerations, and as such the art does not remain central. If this were the only attitude taken to the art then it would be problematic. Accepted as the occasional deviation, however, it only reinforces the strength of the norm that relates to such outliers.

**Footnotes:**

535 Knowing more about curators and their preferences can inform a viewer of the reasons for a particular approach. Tate Modern, partly for that reason, includes the name of the curator(s) who designed each of the themed rooms that are a part of the permanent installation. The name appears at the bottom of the wall panel, which introduce the organizational concept for the displayed works.

536 Schaffner, “Wall Text,” 164.

Many of these ideas are vaguely considered in the informational material about Bigger Picture, but because the program was founded with an uncertain status within the museum, the program’s effectiveness remains inconsistent. The program could be an effective means of outreach to new audiences, but such a public relations initiative would require the museum to explain why the program is significant, perhaps even valuable, to Tate’s mission “to promote public understanding and enjoyment.” The program does not currently have theoretical underpinnings to argue on behalf of its deviant playfulness. Some of the language used, for example “ways of reading works,” reinforces a literary approach to art that is a major concern for curators and art specialists who notice that viewers are reading rather than viewing. I can not rewrite Bigger Picture’s explanatory material but I can offer arguments that Tate and other art institutions could use to support and defend such a program.

The rest of this chapter is based on Charles Garoian’s performative paradigm as a means of explaining the effectiveness of Bigger Picture in widening the doors of perception for viewers. A strong deconstructive strain in the theories discussed does not imply that I believe or support a flippant, “anything goes” attitude towards art. Rather, I believe that presenting alternative approaches to the norm can help general audiences develop their own curiosity about the great scholarship available on art movements and artists, while also providing many scholars with new angles from which to consider their research and link established research with other areas of interest. In addition, following the important work done by Vernon, Preziosi, David Carrier and others, the current art historical paradigm has its own theoretical postulates that are no more definitive than the playful questioning provided in deconstructive postmodern approaches,
though that will be investigated at greater length in the next section. Bigger Picture offers new ways of seeing, and in so doing invites new audiences to participate in art’s future.
CHAPTER IV.2

BIGGER IDEAS FOR TATE MODERN’S BIGGER PICTURE

To review briefly: the museum shares knowledge, so that the viewer can participate in accordance with the scholarship and expertise of the authority’s viewpoint. The viewer is accepted as a “good viewer” for having seen what the curator wants the viewer to see. The museum presents an authoritative history that precludes the individual’s experiences. Robert Harbison is an architectural theorist who described this practice in 1977 as the “museumifying” of cultural history. The historicism prevalent in museums “confirms a dominant sequence of historical periods, a canonical master-narrative leading to the present moment, and which seems incapable of registering alternate histories, counter-memories, or resistance practices.” Dewey suggests that the effects of an aesthetic experience have been consigned to the museum as an outgrowth of socio-economics: “The growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life.” The approach to art is thus cordoned off as a special practice, not relevant to the viewer’s approach to her own life. Art represents large social movements, historical events, “great” aesthetic leaps forward, but may not be personally applicable and resonant.

Departures from this divisive vision are considered irrelevant, inappropriate or unacceptable. Charles Garoian, who teaches at Art Education at the School for Visual Arts at Penn State University, has a theoretical framework for interacting with art objects that he described in an article, “Performing the Museum.” The term “performative” is used in order to highlight that the audience will no longer be a passive viewer, roaming idly and reading to see as instructed. Instead, viewers will engage in active processes, experiencing consciously what they see and how they see, “performing” the steps of their participation within the museum: performing museum culture, performing museum institution, performing perception, performing autobiography, performing critical inquiry, and performing interdisciplinarity. His performative notion is useful in discussing the work being done in the Bigger Picture project, by showing how each performative concept that he develops can be applied to captions.

Performing museum culture is the classic way to behave in a museum. A museum presents a certain disciplinary pedagogy around aesthetic artifacts revealed in the language code of aesthetics and art history, with its particular methodology for looking at and thinking about the art object. That code reveals attitudes and beliefs within the discipline that are then expected of other viewers. When a viewer can recognize an artist’s work or discuss a work’s placement in the art historical hang of a gallery, then the viewer is performing museum culture. Performing the museum institution considers the social role of the museum, externally in the world and internally within its personnel practices. The museum’s declared interests in its mission statement, or the more discrete goals and values of its board members, can influence which works are displayed and how they are displayed, as well as what artists and movements receive

focused shows. A viewer’s engagement with the works in the museum can be deeply influenced by these factors; public ideas about museums can influence how a viewer perceives a show, an artist, or even a particular work within that setting.

Wall text is a particularly good example of how these performative applications necessarily mingle. Labels, driven by the knowledge and ideas of the curator, are a place to perform museum culture. The ideas of the specific curatorial staff and the museum board’s approval of which shows to produce also declares its institutional intentions, and of course, a label’s very presence indicates certain notions. Wall text written by the lead art historian curating the show (or a graduate student on fellowship whose work is usually overseen by that curator) is inevitably revised by the Education or Interpretation department, leading to disputes across the museum divisions. In most instances, a final wall text has been written and re-written by several people in different departments so that no one voice or preference is evidently dominant.542 The separate roles played by the assorted museum staff “provides viewers with insight into the business and politics of museums and the ways in which they construct history through their collections and exhibitions.”543 No matter how eloquent or inelegant, wall text reveals an interpretive stance. The field of art history, which Garoian establishes as museum culture, becomes an extension therefore of the museum as an institution.

Museum culture and museum institution are the common manners for interacting with art, but Garoian succinctly reviews the benefits of other viewing approaches:

To enter into a dialogue with museum artifacts challenges the monologic pedagogy of museums, an epistemological model established during the

---

542 This is another reason why text is anonymous, although for longer wall plaques by gallery entries, including their names seems possible. This mixture of voices is one way that the museum authority is not singular but an amorphous “they” whom no one can find but everyone can blame.
543 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 247.
Enlightenment whereby the museum’s art historical knowledge is privileged and the private cultural histories of viewers denied. Performing the museum is a radical pedagogical strategy that critiques the exclusivity of the Enlightenment mindset in order to create an open discourse between museum culture and viewers.544

The other performative options, developed by Garoian and listed earlier, are more radical in their recommendations. Performing Autobiography encourages the viewer to experience the work from an entirely personal perspective, calling on memory and associations. Performing Perception focuses the viewers on sensory experiences rather than intellectual interpretation. Garoian includes critical inquiry in his autobiographic approach, but I have selected to examine it separately to highlight how art can cultivate a patience and discipline with one’s intellectual efforts. Performing Interdisciplinarity includes the methods and information of other fields to reflect on works of art.

All these performative options appear in the Bigger Picture captions, which often mix multiple approaches. Just as performing museum culture and performing museum institution were deeply intertwined, so do many of these performative options weave aspects of each other into their practice. Observing some Bigger Picture captions through each of the lenses that Garoian has designated helps understand the particular ways in which these captions contribute to new ways of seeing. Rather than maintaining viewership as a singular activity, Garoian’s performative approaches invite new identities, cultures, intellectual activities, and senses into the experience and history of art. Bigger Picture likewise encourages alternate reactions with the hope of developing new audiences.

544 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 237.
In an exhibit study done at Tate Modern, Distinguished Voices, different style captions were used to check audience preference in a questionnaire distributed at the end of the exhibit. There were far too few participants to make the study statistically relevant, but respondents did confirm that the creative captions (as opposed to their taking the form of bullet points, regular captions or no caption, each of which was offered on a different day of the one week in which this took place) did force viewers to look back at the work of art to see what connection existed. Some respondents clearly did not feel there was a relationship, but the lack of author identity was determined to be part of the confusion. The author of the Bigger Picture caption is provided, in order to highlight the individual nature of the response. The Bigger Picture responses are reminders that there is no single response to the work, and that anyone can join the conversation.

Breaching the singularity of the standard caption, the Bigger Picture caption debunks “the idea of a single definitive ‘Tate voice.’” Multiple interpretative approaches to a work of art invite reactions that may not be currently available within the cultural stream. By including a personal caption, the museum posits that this non-authoritative voice is acceptable within the gallery context. The label can also address individual difficulties with the work, particularly the many twentieth-century works that intentionally undermine their status as works of beauty or put in question their identity as objects of art.

For viewers in pursuit of pure aesthetic experience, who may want to dismiss an object because it does not look like art, wall labels can say what the small museum won’t tell: ‘It’s okay that you don’t find this pleasing, it wasn’t made to be.’

Unlike the texts of the museum’s anonymous captions that are written by art history experts, the Bigger Picture captions introduce the voice of audience members who have struggled with the

---

545 Schaffner, “Wall Text,” 158.
work of art, or who have always loved it for personal reasons. They come with perspectives offered by the sciences, literature, entertainment, or the reflecting capacity of the recently retired. They may be less informed than the curators, but they express a sincere engagement with the work.

The artist Richard Sennett believes a good show should present a problem, rather than attempt to be coherent, because “instruction is a kind of repression of the viewer’s own impression” (Dercon 134). Precisely this concern of repressing alternative visions is what the Bigger Pictures caption program aims to circumvent. But even recognizing the possibility that traditional plaques restrict potential meaning, Tate Modern keeps the typical caption. Traditional didactic wall text has not been entirely dismissed, despite Sennett and others’ desire, in part because the project aims to contribute to the conversation already extant with new perspectives. Wall text can act as stepping stones, or perhaps as the mortar that helps bring the show together for the viewer. A refusal to accept the strong work of scholarly research would clearly reduce the possible conversations, and that is not the point at all.

Tate Modern’s interest in undermining a verbal, historical trajectory was particularly challenged by its association with Tate Britain, which operates as a more traditional universal survey museum. As Griselda Pollock wrote in the first chapter of *Museums After Modernism*: “Is the museum charged to deliver a history of art lesson to its visitors? Or should it be hung so that each visitor can experience the work unscripted by its place in such a narrative?” (Pollock and Zemans 9). Tate Modern has designed many ways of circumventing traditional narratives about the work, and the Bigger Picture program aims to create new dialogue possibilities. Speaking as a curator of the Harvard Fogg Museum, Ivan Gaskell believes “museums can legitimately treat
objects of visual interest as having no pasts, and as occupying no field other than the immediate circumstances of those museums themselves,” though he discourages the notion that they do so exclusively.\textsuperscript{546} He recognizes that “useful” art historical information sometimes interjects greater confusion in the viewer’s reception of the work.

Art historians need not consider art audiences in their writing with the degree of attention that the museum curator must struggle to balance an audience’s ability to understand why certain juxtapositions provide important or innovative reinterpretations of the works on display.

The ideals of exhibit preparation can also be frustrated by the intrusion of questionable assumptions about the character of expected or intended viewing constituencies, but the accommodation of viewer’s legitimate expectations is an integral part of the preparation of any display.\textsuperscript{547}

The ideal audience does not exist, and reactions to a show, a permanent exhibit, or the wall text will likewise meet with a variety of responses. Lisa C. Roberts encourages the dialogic process in spite of the “unpredictability of visitor [viewer] responses and narratives.” As a museum educator, she is concerned with how museums engage and keep audience attention. Art venues must continue to present messages, “but they must do it in a way that is respectful of the narratives constructed by viewers and that is conscious of and explicit about the constructive process engaged by museums themselves” (Roberts 146). Research, development, and exhibition in a historical mode by the museum must continue, even as the museum recognizes new dialogues occurring. The museum can “be informed by non-art-historical concerns—even by concerns antipathetic to art history” such as one Bigger Picture caption discussed under Performing Autobiography.\textsuperscript{548} In this way, the museum helps develop and encourage new ways

\textsuperscript{546} Paul Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” 404.
\textsuperscript{547} Paul Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” 404.
\textsuperscript{548} Paul Barolsky et al., “Writing (and) the History of Art,” 405.
of appreciating the works, and adapts to help develop a new generation of potential art historians and curators.

Garoian argues that the museum’s institutional pedagogy in fact benefits by including viewers’ knowledge and experiences. These introduce critical experiential content that the museum cannot produce on its own. The performative focus of Garoian’s article aims to contribute how spectators participate in the art experience, where their creative and political agency is permitted space within museum culture. Art critics writing journalistic reviews, and art historians producing extensive academic articles, are not the only ones who can earnestly engage the work. The work of art is not beyond appreciation or reproach by the daily spectator—as every Bigger Picture caption proves. Garoian’s performative options support new forms of engagements, which themselves support the needs and desires of today’s art audiences.

Viewers’ agency enables their use of museum culture as a source through which to imagine, create, and perform new cultural myths that are relevant to their personal identities. In doing so, a critical dialogue is created between viewers and the museum.549

These alternate approaches can develop new dialogues between the museum and its visitors, expanding the possibilities for the individual and the institution. As the museum embraces individual reactions, it broadens the conceptual framework in which the museum operates and could allow the museum to contribute new presentations that elicit non-traditional reactions from visitors. The museum has an established set of cultural myths that relate to the museum’s mission and place within the art and political world. As viewers are encouraged to respond to works within their own frameworks, the cultural myths surrounding certain works (or

549 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 235.
the museum itself) will be altered. New dialogues, new ideas will lead to new cultural impressions.

In order to showcase how the captions provide lenses upon these performative options, I focus on specific qualities of the captions rather than looking at them in all their facets. Not all of the captions discussed herein are currently on display. Some have been removed, while others anticipate their turn. For the purposes of providing a review of the scope of the captions, I made the decision to adopt any of the ones that have been received and confirmed as potential inclusions, even if their time is over, or yet to come. Developing a framework for the project’s significance is only possible because the writers of Bigger Picture captions so earnestly declared their own point of view. As Roberta Smith wrote upon the museum’s opening, truly Tate Modern is “a place for people with different levels of interest and sophistication to encounter and learn about art” (Smith Tate 1).

1. PERFORMING MUSEUM CULTURE

Though Bigger Picture welcomes spontaneous, informal reactions, some Bigger Picture caption participants share their art historical knowledge, embracing the museum culture of which they are a part. Museum culture is still influenced by the historical development of museums and so has elitist associations. Since museums own and showcase art that has been accepted as important across centuries, or offers contemporary art that has been deemed the cutting edge, museums are not simply visual display centers but inherently intellectual places through their

---

550 I am extremely grateful to Corinne Scott and Tate Modern Interpretation Team for sharing their time with me to explain the project, including its haphazard origin and its inconsistent activity. They were kind enough to provide me with the file of the current and past captions for this study of their project. Their generosity made my work possible. All captions remain the copyright of the Tate.
reference to art history or theory. Understanding why an artist or a work of art is acclaimed and belongs on view supposes a certain education in the history of art, or in the theories of its practice and development. To perform museum culture is, therefore, to speak comfortably and eloquently about an artist or artwork from that trained viewpoint.

One of the initial Bigger Pictures captions was by the Booker Prize winning novelist A.S. Byatt, whose interest in art regularly extends to introducing works of art into her fiction. For Tate Modern, she chose Stanley Spencer’s *The Centurion*, revealing knowledge about the artist’s work and practice: “Spencer’s paintings are always about the complicated relations between solid flesh and the spirit. This painting is a forerunner of his great paintings of the Resurrection in Cookham.” Byatt is sufficiently familiar with the artist to place *The Centurion* in the artist’s development, and even make a sweeping statement that resounds with the authority of her certain judgment: “always about the complicated relations...” (my emphasis).

Byatt largely stays within the parameters of accepted art historical information. She continues her reflection to discuss Spencer’s aims with this work: “Spencer thought first of painting an outdoor Christ, and then decided to paint the indoor return of life.” Her research into the painting’s progression is clear from her knowledge of the steps he took. For that reason she is also comfortable quoting him about the position of the characters who are “in what he calls ‘my own praying positions.’” She suggests one of the figures looks like the artist “the boy, or young man, who resembles Spencer himself,” which information she may have garnered from the

---

551 *The Matisse Stories*, from 1993, are inspired by three works by the painter, and her 2009 *The Children’s Book* delves into artists and their lives at the turn of the 20th century England.
display caption. After this comment, her caption for *The Centurion* veers into a space of her own interpretation when she says that the young man “seems to be awakening in every sense to his presence in his own body,” which support her argument that Spencer’s paintings are about “the complicated relations between flesh and spirit” by having the boy become aware of his spiritual embodiment. She concludes that “the more I see of Spencer the greater I think he is, classical and totally idiosyncratic at once.” This application of the first person is all that separates her notes from a standard museum caption. The conviction of her knowledge on the artist is softened by the personal references, but she is clearly comfortable within museum culture.

One of the remarkable features of reading the Bigger Picture captions is noticing how some artists seem to receive similarly styled responses by different people. Stanley Spencer’s 1947-50 *The Resurrection: Port Glasgow* provoked another Booker prize-winning author, Julian Barnes. Barnes has also written fiction strongly influenced by art, and his caption similarly bridges the art historical information at the root of museum culture with his own reflections on the painting. When Barnes says “If you showed this painting to someone schooled in the European tradition of Christian painting, they might be hard-put to guess that anything transcendental was going on,” his reference to an audience’s understanding of the European Christian tradition presumes his own knowledge of it, even though his tone is more casual than the typical caption with its “if...then” construction. A tongue-in-cheek title follows, “Reveille in a Troglodytic Community with a Highly Developed Textile Industry,” which introduces a much stronger interpretive lens than that which Byatt allowed, but reveals his knowledge of Glasgow

---

552 All Tate works have their captions on the website for reader’s reference. I am uncertain whether the caption was in place when Byatt visited the museum and saw The Centurion, but whether she read the description of the likeness on the caption or some other text, her knowledge indicates her prior information about the artist. The display caption can be viewed: [http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/spencer-the-centurions-servant-t00359/text-display-caption](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/spencer-the-centurions-servant-t00359/text-display-caption). Byatt also wrote a caption for Henri Matisse’s Trivaux Pond.
because there is nothing in the actual painting to suggest textile industry (and, in all fairness to
Spencer’s depiction, the people are not that brutish).

Barnes’ humor does not eradicate, however, his firm convictions about art, for example
when he says: “Where that European tradition assures us of the miracle of eternal life within the
base clod of existence, Spencer approaches matters from the opposite direction.” The certainty
with which Barnes speaks about the European tradition reinforces the authority typical of
museum captions. Barnes never uses the first person as Byatt does, but his statements about
Spencer’s Resurrection—that it is “comforting, democratic, villagey, blithe, and unmenaced by
the threat of God’s judgment”—veer away from the austerity of art historical fact. He is even
willing to declare without hesitation the source of Spencer’s “genius,” a term fraught by over-use
within the staid academic resources that define museum culture.

Many of the captions include elements of museum culture because, intentionally or not,
references to the artist’s biography or the work of art’s history, help ground ideas about the work.
The other novelists who have submitted captions (Will Self, Ian Rankin, Howard Jacobson,
Michelle Roberts, among others) also responded to figurative works, though from varying time
periods, perhaps because a person or object more easily captures a narrative imagination,
although neither Byatt nor Barnes offered fictions as some other captions do. Most captions
included elements of art history, substantiating that museum culture—art history and theory—
will remain the foundation for any extended contemplation of a work of art. The other
performative options that Garoian introduces, and which I am here observing, simply extend
beyond that purview, allow other ideas to converse with the traditional dialogue.
2. **Performing Museum Institution**

The “signifying power of the museum’s institutional context” influences how viewers will respond to the information or works on display.\(^{553}\) Once the work is in a museum, the object takes on approved cultural value of the kind with which the museum has ideologically chosen to ally itself. Viewers can participate more consciously in the cultural work of museums if they are aware of its institutional context. Some aspects seem obvious, such as the name Tate Modern, which indicates the general period of art on display. In addition, for some, the name Tate can mean a family of four museums around Great Britain developed and grown out of one man, Henry Tate’s intended gift to the National Gallery, which could not support such a large bequest. Its origin, as a space for something overgrown, may help explain why it remains institutionally receptive to physical and ideological expansion.

Historicizing is the common organizational method within museums, but Tate Modern chose to organize the permanent installation around genre, theme, or concept, rather than a historical narrative with galleries and floors are dedicated to a nation or period.\(^{554}\) When Roberta Smith visited Tate Modern, in 2006, each gallery was organized by a different curator, with a

---

\(^{553}\) Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 246.

\(^{554}\) Tate Britain produced a chronological hang in Summer 2013, in part because a thematic hang has become conventional in its own right. Penelope Curtis explains: “Chronology has been used as a more neutral method of selection, and by using it as a kind of search tool we have produced what we hope will be a combination of the works that viewers would expect to see, alongside those that they would not. Such juxtapositions and mixing of genres and styles, of early and late works can be revealing in various ways. This kind of chronological hang is more unusual, as it is properly chronological, in the sense that it follows real time rather than art historical time. Our key aim here was to use chronology as the tool with which curators would make their selection, and then to set it to one side once we were in the gallery, as and when the aesthetic of the hang demanded it,” Penelope Curtis, “Out with the Thematic at Tate, in with the Chronological - The Art Newspaper,” _The Art Newspaper_, 1 May 2013, [http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Time+is+right+to+rethink+the+chronological+hang/29360](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Time+is+right+to+rethink+the+chronological+hang/29360). The recently reclaimed Old Masters galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC led to moving works and bringing others out of storage for an expanded historical presentation. Keith Christiansen, the chairman of the European Paintings department said, “we arranged the schools in various art-historical paths. For instance, Van Eyck and early Netherlandish painting leads to Rubens and Van Dyck,” Paul Jeromack, “European Paintings Get (back) the Space They Deserve,” _The Art Newspaper_, 16 May 2013, [http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/European-paintings-get-back-the-space-they-deserve/29389](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/European-paintings-get-back-the-space-they-deserve/29389).
theme in mind that coalesced the works on display. This led to some disjunctures, but also permitted multiple curatorial viewpoints, thereby undermining a monolithic museum perspective. She encouraged the curatorial ingenuity and “useful departures from recounting history” that the museum offered in this initiative, even when those efforts did not work, because it allowed for new and unexpected conversations about the work to occur (Smith 1). The museum “as the ultimate professional space” has the opportunity to adopt creative changes in its presentation of art, especially in the context of art that questions institutional practices.

Bringing awareness to the manner of the display space undermines the notion that the works are viewed in isolation. Tate Modern’s Volunteer Visitor Guide, Steve Lockett, describes how he experiences Gerhard Richter’s Cage Paintings 1-6 that are usually displayed together, in one (white-walled) room.

I love to stand in the centre of this room, so the complete set of Richter’s six paintings surround me, at the perfect distance to enjoy the overall impressions—for me watery reflections, dappled light through a forest; even war torn buildings and shredded billboards; all these things come to mind. I also enjoy getting close and studying the detail—the complex and visually exciting layering and dragging of the paint; an effect Richter achieved using a giant squeegee. It’s amazing to realise that he completed all of these paintings in just four productive months!

---

555 Roberta Smith, “Tate Modern’s Rightness Versus MoMA's Wrongs,” New York Times, 1 November 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/01/arts/design/01tate.html?scp=39&sq=modern&st=cse&_r=0. Comparison and analogy therefore become the primary methodology. Not all appreciated Tate Modern’s alternative display concept. Negative responses at Tate Modern opening in 2000 resulted in some design changes, which Roberta Smith notes in her 2006 review, and which illustrate the difficulty of upending expectations. The displays seemed to lack a coherent story because most are educated in the school room to the Enlightenment chronology of progress, and are unwilling to change their visual approach. Narrative wall text helps make that shift by delineating the arc of the curator’s concept, introducing coherence when a period or genre structure is lacking. Key concepts for a themed room are explained at the front entry to a gallery room, by the curator who is responsible for the room’s design.

556 Batchen, “The Art Museum, More or Less,” 170. Batchen adds that the museum thus retains “its position as the most visible symbol of managerial power in art” because the museum is that managerial authority and cannot avoid that role.

557 As of summer 2014, the Richter Cage paintings are on a long term loan to Fondation Beyeler (Basel, Switzerland).
Steve Lockett’s experience is deeply altered by the museum’s decision to present the Richters in a single room, rather than along the wall of a narrow hallway, or spread across one or more rooms intermixed with other works. Being surrounded by an artist’s works focuses the viewer’s attention to choices made within these works by this artist, rather than putting them in dialogue with other styles or media. The museum chose this display intentionally.

Lockett ignores the white walls because audiences are now accustomed to the idea that white walls are a neutralizing choice, limiting the wall’s visual presence by avoiding any color disturbances caused by placing two colors near one another. This “white cube” was not standard practice before the Museum of Modern Art in New York City established the now iconic framework of modernism. A gallery room’s visual and architectural design influences how work is perceived. Lockett’s appreciation for standing “in the centre of this room, so the complete set of Richter’s six paintings surround me, at the perfect distance to enjoy the overall impressions” is due to the fact that the museum provides a room for the exclusive display of this set of six paintings, large enough to see each one at a “perfect distance.” Though each work can be appreciated within the artist’s oeuvre, they were produced over four months in 2006 as a set, in response to the music of John Cage.

MoMA’s interior was the first major example of the “white cube”: “antiseptic, laboratory-like spaces, enclosed, isolated, artificially illuminated, and apparently neutral environments in which viewers could study works of art displayed as so many isolated specimens.” Inside the white cube, viewers could see art without the cultural influences that other architectural designs instilled. Trying to remove art from its idealized status within the society, this approach intended to provide the revolutionary works of the early twentieth century with an environment that permit them their radical departure from the past. The white cube offered a way of seeing these Modernist works without historical baggage, to let the art “speak” for itself rather than within a continuum. It offered an “aesthetic of reification, an aesthetic that redefined both the work of art and the viewer who was prompted to gaze upon the work with something approaching scientific detachment...In this technologized space, the work acquired its Utopian aura.” Alan Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art: The Past’s Future,” Journal of Design History 5, no. 3 (January 1, 1992): 209-10.

Cage 1-6 were on display during Tate Modern’s 2012 show. At that time, the institution explained Richter’s correspondence with Cage: “He has long been interested in Cage’s ideas about ambient sound and silence, and has approvingly quoted his statement ‘I have nothing to say and I am saying it’. Richter is also drawn to Cage’s rejection of intuition as well as total randomness, planning his compositions through structures and chance procedures” Tate, http://www.tate.org.uk/gerhard-richter-room-guide/gerhard-richter-room-14.
Modern, responds to the works through his personal appreciation for them. Only Lockett’s comment that Richter used a giant squeegee to layer and drag the paint indicates that he knows something about the artist’s practice or the works. His impressions—“for me watery reflections, dappled light through a forest; even war torn buildings”—then acknowledge his close investigation of the paintings when he admits that he likes “getting close and studying the detail.” Though Lockett does not address the influence of the room, there is little doubt that part of the effect of the paintings comes from their size and united display, allowing him to stand “in the centre” of the room as well as then “getting close.”

Richter is not alone in needing to have his works displayed together. Mark Rothko’s *Seagram Murals* were donated by the artist to Tate Gallery so that they could be seen “in reduced light and in a compact space.”°°° John Begley, a performance poet and comedian, speaks to the importance of space in his poem “Rothko”:

In the Rothko room,  
The Rothko room,  
I sense I’m sat in a catacomb.  
A sense of something  
You might exhume.  
In the Rothko room,  
The Rothko room  
The floating blues and purples loom  
In the Rothko room  
The Rothko room  
You get a sense of suspending doom  
In the Rothko room  
The Rothko room  
They’re side by side like a bride  
And gloom.

But, then there’s the yellow ones.

°°° Tate, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rothko-black-on-maroon-t01031/text-catalogue-entry
Begley’s amusing description of the Rothko room’s oppressive sensation channels the Tate Catalogue’s quote about Rothko’s hope to emulate Michelangelo’s Medicean Library in Florence: “just the kind of feeling I'm after - he makes the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up.” The maroon and black palette evoke brick, and create a density that effectively allows the room to be rhymed with loom, doom, and gloom, and create the claustrophobia of a catacomb with the consequent desire to be exhumed. Having a room exclusively showing one artist is an institutional decision that greatly alters the viewer’s experience. Both Richter and Rothko have works displayed by Tate Modern in isolation from others, which gives the works added power and influences the viewer’s perception of the these artists’ works. The artists knew this and Tate Modern manifests that preference. As Roberta Smith wrote: “Architecture is destiny. It forms an extremely tangible mission statement that communicates an institution’s core values.”

The Neo-classical architectural design of many universal survey museums establishes the manner by which viewers engage with the works, where visitors learn how to “enact a ritual that equates state authority with the idea of civilization.” Architectural details “form a coherent iconographic programme,” where reliefs and murals in entryways, along corridors, and on the building’s exterior will often incorporate the history of the nation state, with analogies produced by depicting mythic tales and iconic Virtues protectively upholding the establishment. As Foucault noted, “the instruments of government” in the nineteenth century, when most museums

563 Geoffrey Batchen, “The Art Museum, More or Less,” in Dialogue: Australian Essays on Art History, ed. Ian Burn (North Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 451. Batchen goes on to explain that the architectural program in museums often uses “authoritative literary sources—written or orally-transmitted myths, litanies, sacred texts, epics—and they frequently evoke a mythic or historical past that informs and justifies the values celebrated in the ceremonial space.” Murals celebrating the nation’s cultural heroes and engraved marble plaques applauding founding patrons exalt the cultural value of the museum’s artifacts, and by contrast diminish visitors.
were being established, aimed to produce conduct norms not by using corporal punishment but by conditioning behaviors through environmental clues.\textsuperscript{564} Since museums share many characteristics akin to ceremonial monuments, they make visible the idea of the state through architectural rhetoric.\textsuperscript{565}

The modern art survey museums clearly do not use this neoclassical architecture, but they are designed to be no less influential and grand, awe-inspiring to its audiences. If the neoclassical universal survey museums guided the visitors through an impressive history of art and the state, then MoMA and the modern art survey museums that it influenced offer a new approach, “a massive restructuring of the viewing subject.”\textsuperscript{566} With glass and granite soaring up to distant ceilings that allow room for large-scale works, these rooms also influence the viewer’s sense of proportion. The sky is the limit, the architecture implies; the state has been revoked, the past has been rejected for the sake of now—here is the primacy of art. The viewing subject should no longer expect art to enforce established cultural values but to disrupt and disturb. Seen

\textsuperscript{564} Michel Foucault, \textit{The Archaeology of Knowledge; and The Discourse on Language}, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 95.

\textsuperscript{565} Geoffrey Batchen, “The Art Museum, More or Less,” 449. Ceilings, for example, are used in traditional ritual structures to portray the benefactors that preside over the building, which can include gods, princes, and patrons. In museums these benefactors of the arts become protectors of civilization: “whoever claimed state power also claimed the ceilings” (Batchen 461). The ceilings portrayed a state whose benevolence was demonstrated by the patronage and protection it offered the arts. The ceilings proposed an equation between the goodness of the state and the cultivation of the arts. In the nineteenth century, the first term of the proposition—the state—began to disappear from the ceilings, and the second term, elaborated as art history, was then used to imply the missing first term. As familiarity with art history became increasingly widespread, the ceilings’ allegorical lessons in art history became superfluous. Consequently the second term of the proposition could also be suppressed. Now both terms of the original proposition—the state and what it gives—are implied. The modern visitor touring the museum thus enacts the state ceremony subliminally. (Batchen 462)

\textsuperscript{566} Alan Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art: The Past’s Future,” \textit{Journal of Design History} 5, no. 3 (January 1, 1992): 208. MoMA instituted this new orientation in art and design in 1939 by shoring the modern art collections in a modernist building, which helped reinforce the modernist aesthetic being debated and determined within the galleries. Wallach called the architecture its “most representative artifact” and “the most potent signifier of its Utopian aspirations” (208). The architectural design of the Godwin Stone building was a purposeful break with the art establishment, and played a significant role in showcasing how MoMA expected to redefine the public’s engagement with these new art works.
on white walls, with high ceilings, art would continue to appear grand, but now as a freeing from the constraints of tidy and compact social circles. The architectural historian William Curtis concludes his explanation of the museum’s design choices by stating that “this architecture heightens perception without impeding the experience of looking at the art.”

In renovating the Bankside Power Station, Tate Modern architecturally allied itself with a new wave of art that made use of found objects, repurposed materials, collaged different elements together, discovered visual value that had been rejected, and accorded the awkward and ugly its own value. Renovating a defunct industrial structure for an art venue itself suggests a shift in how the art could be perceived, but maintaining features of the original power station complicated hanging and displaying works. The “fortress-like brick-clad structure” with a 325-foot central chimney that was completed in 1963, was outmoded by 1981. Shut down and left in disuse for decades, the building required major refurbishment in the last decade of the century when it was proposed as a museum. Curtis reviewed how the architectural firm, Heron & de Meuron, relied on “the translucence of sandblasted glass or the subtle, restrained effects of gauzes and screens, combined with visually weightless white walls, ceilings, and partitions” to shift away from the heavy and ponderous architecture of the brick power station. Art, the architecture says, should not impose but inspire. If the entry galleries of traditional survey museums have decorative architectural details to establish grandeur, the Turbine Hall, expanding 500 feet long by 75 feet wide with a height of 115 feet, has sheer size and volume with which to minimize the viewer. A longitudinal skylight replaces the traditional ceiling covered in

---

567 William J.R. Curtis, “Herzog & de Meuron’s Architecture of Luminosity and Transparency Transforms an Old Power Station,” *Architectural Record* 188, no. 6 (June 2000), 104.
569 Curtis, “Herzog & de Meuron’s,” 104.
beneficent gods and rulers, but provides the now traditional modern symbol for the limitlessness of art.

Another reviewer discussed how converting a building from one purpose to another depends on managing the scale necessary for the new function. The 370,000 square foot power station provided a “gargantuan entry hall” which is “wisely left almost entirely free of art”; though Louise Bourgeois created several large sculptures for the opening ceremony, they have been replaced with other large-scale works in the intermittent years. Just as Mies van der Rohe insisted on “almost nothing,” so did Herzog & de Meuron use the expansive spaces of the existing power plant to produce something like a covered public street. (Curtis 104). The large open spaces intend to become invisible as if the viewer had stumbled into some quarter of London with art on display. The lack of admissions fee, except for special shows, makes this flâneur’s dream possible. The concept of the museum as a “covered public street” reiterates the fascination that many modernists had with arcades. We may now associate such spaces largely with commercial shopping malls, but they were once innovative and full of exciting wares to be perused. Their capitalist use does not decrease their ongoing application as a public terrain for haphazard encounters for adolescents, and a safe gathering space for senior walking groups.

The design’s attempt to subdue the imposing structure also allows viewers to notice the art on their own terms. Making the aesthetic artifacts primary reiterates what Duncan and Wallach found in more traditional art settings; the visitor is prompted to perform the values and

---

571 Curtis, “Herzog & de Meuron’s,” 104.
572 The architects intentionally eliminated the ceremonial staircase associated with monumental museums, but this posed its own set of associative difficulties, Filler, “More or Less,” 38. The escalators pose a problem for most of the reviewers, veering precariously near “modern merchandising” spaces, Curtis, “Herzog & de Meuron’s,” 105. The challenges of producing “an open and transparent interpretation” of a structure dedicated to contemporary art are inevitable, but Roberta Smith applauds how Tate Modern manages to “have a large institution feel personal to its visitors,” Smith, “Tate Modern’s Rightness Versus MoMA’s Wrongs,” 1.
beliefs written into the architectural script of the temple to art, where “works of art play the same role as in traditional ceremonial monuments.” The works of art become fetishistic objects in this manner with spectators insinuated into this desire game. Viewers are expected to proceed reverently, pausing briefly with soulful conscientiousness before certain objects, particularly those that are at a remove (behind glass or via a rope line), and discourse in hushed tones, respectful and humble, honoring and adoring. Tate Modern, however, provides themed rooms for its permanent collection, and the hubbub in these rooms suggests that viewers are less than obsequious in discussions about the work. In addition, each floor has a central area with several lounge spaces, interactive displays, documentary films about art and movements, which encourage viewers to make themselves comfortable and get involved in their experience.

The architecture of the building and the impact of the rooms is one institutional practice that consistently influences the experience of viewing art. The critic, curator, and now Dean of the Yale School of Art, Robert Storr claims that the structure of the gallery has a syntax and grammar that can communicate and influence even without language.

Galleries are paragraphs, the walls and formal subdivisions of the floors are sentences, clusters or works are clauses, and individual works, in varying degree, operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and often as more than one of these functions according to their context.

In so many ways Tate Modern was designed to undermine traditionally held attitudes about art, to become a meeting place for a divergent public, to have art excite and inspire by becoming an

---

574 Garoian suggests that the temperature regulation to protect the works of art also “produces a sublime atmosphere for the body” just as the low level lighting “subdues the body to a meditative state” and the positioning of works on the wall at a certain height can “submit the gaze and stance of viewer’s bodies to a servile normative position,” Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 247.
extension of the viewing public’s regular life. Raising awareness of institutional display practices can help viewers consider their reactions, as well as imagine possible alternatives.

Another important display practice to consider is the manner by which the art works are displayed on the wall. Tate Frames Conservator, Alastair Johnson, describes the significance of how Georges Rouault’s *The Three Judges* was first shown to buyers.

This painting is displayed in a late seventeenth-century style French carved frame. The frame may have been chosen by Rouault’s dealer as a way of presenting a challenging modern work to an established market in a familiar context. This was a common practice in the first half of the twentieth-century. The frame may also have appealed to the artist specifically for its dilapidated condition. It has lost most of its gesso ground and gold layers, revealing the crude assembly of carved timbers that lie beneath the decorative surface.

The frame encourages a buying audience by placing the new work within a traditional context. The Fauvist and Expressionist influences of the painting are placed within a frame evocative of the styles preferred by the French Académie, which had strict guidelines about art and a hierarchy of genres. The frame alone suggests the work’s value, which the dealer knew would be a way of ensuring a successful sale. The peeling gold layers provide age and status to Rouault’s work, while “the crude assembly of carved timbers” reveals the falsity of the decorative surface and so analogously supports the unmasking at the core of Fauvist and Expressionist efforts. Both painting and frame incorporate refinement and base qualities. Such elements are signals of how and where the work belongs, within the larger art world, and Johnson is particularly capable of explaining how art is framed institutionally for a certain verdict from its audience.

The recognition that museums are filled with the personal identities of individual curators, board members, directors, and other staff lessens the dramatic effect of suggesting that the spectator incorporate a personal approach. Such critical pragmatism can be revelatory.
Garoian quotes the science philosopher Robert Crease to explain the value of a disjunctive pedagogy. Such “argumentative analogies” allow ideas and images to connect and “expose knowledge that is otherwise unknown or hidden”; when viewers bring personal identities into play with the dominant ideologies established in the museum, museums and the works of art contained within can develop relationships to “contemporary cultural lives.”

3. PERFORMING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Notable in the Bigger Picture captions discussed so far is the use of the first person. This is key to the project overall, and part of its radical nature. As explained in the earlier history of universal survey museums, the individual is minimized in favor of commemorating the greatness of the society. Introducing the individual’s personal narrative into the museum is therefore transgressive. Cultural theorist Michel de Certeau suggests in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that introducing subjective experiences disrupts the codified performance of everyday existence: “Its foreignness makes possible a transgression of the law of the place [cultural assumptions of the museum]. Coming out of its bottomless and mobile secrets, a ‘coup’ modifies the local order.”

Viewers speak in the first person when they share personal narratives. They act through their subjective knowledge, contrary to the third-person narratives of the museum that “speak” for no one and everyone. When viewers’ permit their own memories and cultural histories to appear in response to works of art, the monolithic historical pedagogy of the museum is disrupted.

The dominant universal voice used by the museum can be characterized by J.L. Austin’s proposition for constative speech, as differentiated from performative speech. 

---

576 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 236.
578 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 238.
speech statements are predicated on true or false statements, where curators’ academic knowledge of a work of art is declared truth. Introducing the personal story into the narrative or the visual elements in the artwork produces relations between the viewer and the work, where the viewer’s pronouncements on the work alter the way it is seen. Viewers “create verbal analogies, metaphors, and metonymies to represent their perceptual experiences.”579 Considering this subjective stance takes into account not only the work of art, but “what might be at work in our reaching out towards it.”580 A first person description not only addresses the art but recognizes a relationship between the speaker and the work.

Many of the Bigger Picture captions use clearly defined first person narratives to express preference, confusion, understanding, and appreciation. Art has often outraged and those vehement reactions tend to stem from first person horror at the travesty on canvas, in marble, or any other form. Hollie McNish, the spoken word poet, explains her own distaste for Piet Mondrian and how she changed her mind.

I have to admit - I used to pass works like this and think 'that's rubbish; a child could’ve done it'. Two things have changed since I made those sorts of comments. Firstly, a friend has eagerly explained the background of this piece to me and secondly, I now have a child. Looking at the work again now, I feel differently. I don’t think a child could have done it, but I also don’t think it is an insult to say that it is like a child’s painting. I think children see beauty and form in a very pure, honest way. I see it in the way my daughter gazes at colours, at steam, at objects. Seeing the world through a baby’s eyes and understanding more about this artist's ideas, I can appreciate works like this now. I really like looking at it.

Permitting the use of the first person in these captions not only allows the viewers to acknowledge their own experience, but also acknowledges that we do not engage with each work at the same level of appreciation. The authoritative monotone of the traditional caption provides

all artworks the same due, while the first person recognizes that some are favored, some
disdained, while some change with us.

McNish begins with the classic comment that “my child could have done this,” which
sympathetically accepts the many viewers who are baffled by various modern art practices. In so
doing, she may better reach that audience to help them understand why she no longer perceives
the work in that simplistic manner. A friend explained the work to her, but her own child helped
her realize the level of complexity in the work. Most importantly, however, she introduces a
subtler notion that in fact a “child’s painting” may not be so dismissive a comment as first seems.
She notices how children “see beauty and form in a very pure, honest way” by appreciating
color, steam, objects of all kinds—not only those prescribed cultural value. She can now “really
like looking at it” not only because she has adopted objective, art historical knowledge from her
friend, but also because she has incorporated the enlightening experience of her own life.

Several of the Bigger Picture captions that are primarily first person accounts use their
space to discuss how they overcame an earlier prejudice, to express an ongoing amazement, or to
counter the accepted viewpoint of the work in favor of their own. The artist Thomas Demand
offers an experience of Donald Judd’s *Untitled (copper box)* that counters Judd’s own aims, that
refuses the art historical information that Demand knows.

This copper box looks a little bit like a non-representational version of a bonfire
—if such a leap of imagination is possible. As charming as a check-in desk, the
sculpture holds a promise of something peculiar: go closer and a warm red glow
emanates from the inside. Donald Judd himself would have preferred us to avoid
such interpretations. The box is not supposed to be more than the sum of its single
parts; in rhetorical terms it’s even less: a concept for fabrication, executed by a
third party.

However for me it also represents a cenotaph—a metaphor for an open
grave. In all its rigidity it is like a monument to the idea of the beauty which
results from unsentimental thinking and a clear and uncompromising approach to making art.

Even knowing that the work was a minimalist intention, Demand cannot view the work that way. Tate Modern caption confirms Demand’s knowledge by stating that “this work reflects [Judd’s] desire to create self-sufficient objects, eliminating any factor that might interfere with the physical qualities of its materials.” Nevertheless, Demand willfully pushes aside the intentionalist claim that the artist’s aim is the sole meaningful relationship to the work. He acknowledges his own response, one that is perceptive, informed, but also personal and imaginative.

By permitting his own experience to overcome his knowledge of the work, he asserts the role of the viewer in the art’s existence, much as Marcel Duchamp argued in his essay “The Creative Act,” when he claimed that art exists through the production of the artist, the existence of the object, but also the audience’s engagement. Demand’s own being influences how he sees the work, and therefore how he thinks about and discusses it. Owning his experience allows him to be more aware of what he sees and to be conscious of the influence his desires and expectations have on how he sees; or, in the words of Tom Robbins from Even Cowgirls get the Blues, “One has not only an ability to perceive the world but an ability to alter one's perception of it; more simply, one can change things by the manner in which one looks at them.”

4. PERFORMING PERCEPTION

Sir Richard Eyre, a director of theatre and film, expresses the crux of performing perception in his experience: “Matisse’s The Snail defies the ‘painted word’ of art criticism: it
doesn’t interrogate, examine, analyse, or engage with anything but the joy of seeing.” The “joy of seeing” is encouraged by emphasizing the viewer’s awareness of the visual experience.

Performing perception is to see what one is looking at, to be absorbed in its aesthetic qualities through empathic projection. Viewers absorb the aesthetic characteristics of art works and, in doing so, discover qualities of experience that metaphorically link with their own memories and cultural histories.⁵⁸¹

Rarely do two viewers write on the same work of art among the Bigger Picture captions. The fact that four unrelated people wrote on Henri Matisse’s *The Snail*, therefore, is surprising, but the work seems to encourage the “joy of seeing” in many of its viewers. A film director, an art critic, and a volunteer visitor host, each address its exuberance; they perceive bright colors and wild shapes to be celebrated in kind. Only the Rector of the Royal College of Art pedantically describes Matisse’s work: “put together before [Matisse] died—large cut-out pieces of paper, painted in gouache in bright colours which together amounted to a spiral within a square.” The dry tone of this caption is in complete contrast to Sir Richard Eyre’s opening words that “this is a monumental leap of exuberance....slabs of colour spiralling around a green centre.” Any temptation to suggest that museum culture has deadened the Rector’s appreciation, however, is undermined by the engaging style adopted by another writer well-versed in the art historical dialogue, the art critic Martin Gayford:

I was in Spain recently, looking at a panel of 14th century Islamic tiles in the Alhambra, in Granada. The lozenges and wedges of colour—turquoise, green, red, yellow—seemed to revolve like festive wheels. At the same time, of course, they were immobile, ordered, fixed to the wall.

I returned to London, looked at Matisse’s *Snail* and saw—very much the same thing. A coincidence? Well, yes and no. Matisse too went to Granada—in 1910 just after he had seen a great exhibition of Islamic art in Munich. About that time, he remembered, ‘I felt the passion for colour developing in me’, and that—looking back—‘the orient saved us’.

⁵⁸¹ Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 240.
The difference between those tiles and *The Snail* is that the former is part of a building. *The Snail* is architecture itself: a mighty, joyful structure cut by a bedridden old man out of sheets of pure colour.

The Rector’s “large cut-out pieces of paper” are Gayford’s “mighty joyful structure cut by a bedridden old man out of sheets of pure colour.” Such a profusion of adjectives and descriptive phrases provide more for the imagination and makes the work amount to more than “a spiral within a square.” Gayford introduces the artist, one enfeebled by time, who could still become excited by color and wish to continue the effort of producing art. These dynamic elements help a viewer begin to see more than simply a collage of cut-outs. Gayford explains how the Islamic tiles he saw in Spain, like “lozenges and wedges” and “festive wheels,” sprung to mind when he returned to Matisse’s late work, though he recognizes that the shapes of color in *The Snail* are “immobile, ordered, fixed to the wall.” He lists some colors, all primary and secondary colors, except for the turquoise, which acts as the introductory color and brightens the “green, red, yellow.” The sheen of turquoise leads nicely into the quote that Matisse felt a passion for color. Gayford’s enthusiasm for his own new vision of this work of art helps the reader begin to see the different elements as something worthy of excitement, an excitement that sometimes requires reference to one’s own earlier visions.

Eva Marie Barker, a visitor host, also describes an evolving experience with Matisse’s *The Snail*. The work may stun her, but she keeps moving through the visual experience, stopping and starting, seeing something new as she goes.

Ever since my first visit to Tate Modern, this work has stopped me in my tracks. I feel that there is a child-like quality about this picture, in the way that the vibrantly coloured pieces of paper have been stuck down, seemingly at random. It feels familiar and approachable. By stopping and looking again it soon becomes apparent that there is nothing random in this composition at all. Instead, a
meticulous approach to the choice of colours, shapes and their final arrangement has created a wonderfully engaging picture of simplicity and clarity.

She was “stopped in [her] tracks” and received an initial impression of its child-like effusion. Her contemplation proceeds from that point. When she later says “by stopping and looking again,” the second stop is a halt on the mental pathway she has described, so that she can see it anew. Comparing it to children’s drawing, as Hollie McNish did with Mondrian, she finds that it makes the work “familiar and approachable.” That ease lets her notice its careful construction, a remarkable showing of “simplicity and clarity.” Her stops and starts suggest to readers that they allow themselves a similar experience of unabashed looking, considering, and noticing again, with this work or any other. Their own way of looking might change.

The visual experience is emphasized in the captions because art is primarily a visual experience. Perception, however, is described by a textbook on Psychology as “the organization, identification, and interpretation of a sensation in order to form a mental representation” where sensation is defined as “any simple stimulation of a sense organ,” and can, therefore, invoke other senses than the visual. Bigger Picture author Kurban Haji reacted to a work by the Japanese artist Susumu Koshimizu through scent: “I can almost smell this work—I grew up near a timber mill in Tanzania, and the scent of wood brings me back to my childhood.” The wooden sculpture reminds him of his home, where the pervasive smell of wood becomes associated with the work. Brian Eno was even more insistent on his alternate sense experience in front of Jean Dubuffet’s The Busy Life: “I think of a dark, jagged African hip-hop, stray voices shouting in and out of the mix and a mosque with a bad PA system wailing in the background.” Permitting senses beyond seeing while looking at art might provide new insights into these and other art works.

Such reactions create relationships to the works that are not subject to the work’s place in art history, but are based in how the person has experienced the world. Garoian explains that art spectators are enacting a form of perception when they articulate responses to work. Whatever the content of that response may be, the very act of putting their reaction into language declares and confirms their perception. Whether responding to paint texture or other visual attributes, the story or concept, the viewer presents a relationship to the art through the words used to describe it. Language then becomes a significant aspect of perceiving a visual work.
CHAPTER IV.3
REMAPPING THE MUSEUM VISIT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY TOUR

What we bring back is the sense of it
Potential as something permanent is, the way a road map
Of even the oldest state suggests in its tangled details
The extent of a country in which topography and settlement
Interrupt only at random into a personal view.
—from “Blue Poles” by Douglas Crase

A museum provides captions to help spectators navigate the visual quality of each work, and offers wall plaques to map the concept of the show. The caption project Bigger Picture at Tate Modern cultivates captions that share attitudes not typically permitted. Inviting figures from other fields to comment on art allows other methodologies to reveal new facets of the work and possibilities for its ongoing relevance. Into a study of viewer engagement in museums, Charles Garoian’s category of “performing interdisciplinarity” recommends applying perspectives to art from other fields and methodologies. Interdisciplinary work questions the “socially and historically determined codes of discipline-based culture”—those managed and maintained by academic positions within the discipline—by cross-pollinating knowledge.583 Moving away from the causal linearity of disciplinary codes, in order to associate heterogeneous fields and map new connections invokes Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome.584 A rhizomatic approach

583 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 245.
584 The Art Bulletin produced “A Range of Critical Perspectives” focused on “Inter/Disciplinarity” to provide discussions by a range of art and visual culture scholars on their use of different disciplinary practices.
“exposes, examines and critiques the boundaries that exist between the disciplines and works of art in order to interconnect academic knowledge with museum knowledge with experiences in the world.”

One Bigger Picture caption by the sociologist Avery F. Gordon on Alighiero e Boetti’s sewn fabric work *Mappa del Mondo* offers an opportunity to observe how these alternative captions can reroute a viewer’s experience, and allows us to weave together art history, sociology, and cartography. The Gordon caption is one way to highlight how a viewing path is delineated for art audiences in traditional captions and how new avenues open when non-disciplinary perspectives are included. Gordon’s personalized entry point shows how museum attendees may map their own journey and thereby admire and respect the artist’s work.

A touring exhibit of Alighiero e Boetti’s work in 2010-2012 did not provide a description of the individual woven maps on display, but offered this wall plaque regarding the works in general:

> For each of his *Mappe*, Boetti traced a world map onto canvas, colored it according to the national flag of each country, and then gave the canvas to Afghan craftswomen to use as the base for a tapestry. He delivered the first such canvas for production in 1971, on his second trip to Afghanistan. Over the next two decades, more than 150 *Mappe* of different colors and sizes were created in this way, forming a symbolic portrait of the passage of time and shifting world politics. In 1979, the embroiderers—unfamiliar with the map image—mistakenly filled the oceans in pink, a color they selected because the thread was in plentiful stock. Boetti loved this intrusion of chance into the design and from then on left it to the makers to choose the color for the seas. He was proud of how little he determined the look of these works, but he did make some critical decisions: for example, in the 1980s he switched the map image from the Mercator projection to the Robinson projection, which, in translating the globe to a flat surface, more accurately represents the relative sizes of the world’s landforms. The borders juxtapose Italian phrases written by Boetti, often referring to the date and place of

---

fabrication, and texts in Persian, which Boetti increasingly left to the craftswomen to supply.

This information about the maps’ development helps viewers understand Boetti’s theory and practice, and admire the craft involved. Such objective appreciation remains centered on the artifact. The viewer is guided to esteem the work mostly through facts, though even these indicate interpretation—such as maps being a “symbolic portrait,” the embroiderers “mistakenly” selecting the color pink, Boetti loving the “intrusion of chance into the design,” and “proud of how little he determined.” The caption is filled with interesting facts, useful anecdotes, but manages to gloss the poignant geopolitics that any viewer in 2010-2012 in the United States would struggle to manage. The viewer is invited to observe the visual changes in the woven maps but the significance of those changes is distanced as a “symbolic portrait of the passage of time and shifting world politics.”

The sociologist Avery F. Gordon’s caption for Alighiero e Boetti’s Mappa del mondo (1978) is personal, referential, and progressive. Now posted on her personal website, she describes her first reaction, explains it, notices other viewers, recalls a memory about the artist to develop a changed perception. She shifts out of an apathetic acceptance of the geopolitical conflict into a recognition that the past remains present through these tapestries, and that the present is still responding to the past.

At first, I just see that this Map of the World was one of the last made for Boetti by Afghan women before the Soviet invasion in 1979 prevented his ever returning to a place he loved. After more than thirty continuous years of international and civil war, it seems a silent and sad geopolitical artefact.

Then, a mother and daughter arrive, smile at its beauty, tracing with their fingers the route from the mother’s birthplace to London. Others stop by and find their own tracks in Boetti’s map. Soon it is full of life, travelling again.

Now, I remember that when Boetti returned home to Italy, he would take the maps out of his bag, smelling of goats, and tell his young daughter Agata stories about how war changes flags and maps and the colour of the sea and people’s words for things and even the embroiderers’ threads.

When Gordon approaches the embroidered map, she is not looking attentively and “just” sees the work in its art historical context, as a “a sad geopolitical artefact.” Starting in 1970, Boetti engaged master weavers in Kabul, Afghanistan to cut national flags into the shape of a state’s territory and sew them onto a large rectangular canvas, taking the “combined taken-for-grantedness of the world map and the flags of nations to generate a striking image of geopolitical division.” The canvas tapestries not only depict the politics of national borders but were produced across that fraught terrain. When the borders closed in 1979, he mailed from Italy the outlined materials to be sewn. As national boundaries and affiliations shifted so did each map.

The abstract geopolitics of the weaving become real when Gordon hears the mother’s story. The map becomes relevant, and the art work’s general subject matter appears through the individual account of the woman—“it is full of life, travelling again.” The tapestry threads weave the ordinary, personal references and relationships, alongside the major socio-political concerns of the art work. Noticing the maternal affiliation and seeing the map materialize the emigrant’s journey reminds Gordon of a biographical detail about the artist. Boetti would show his daughter the travel maps he carried, using them to explain the real world fluidity of the black lines drawn on paper, as people fought to delineate their way of life, to stitch their own social narratives.

Boetti’s maps highlight the ongoing social politics of colonization, the history of weaving in Afghanistan, the country’s particular politics, but also the individuality in each weaver’s efforts, of each country’s struggles, each time period, each parent’s personal story, and so the work invites engagement on an individual basis. Gordon finds *Mappa del Mondo* new again, and exemplifies how audiences can find more to explore if not limited to a single perspective. If “maps, atlases and globes have been used to archive, to convey and to produce knowledge,” then the Gordon caption for Alighiero e Boetti’s maps reveals a strained geopolitical history but also conveys a new engagement.590

The delight exuded in Gordon’s caption, from her own experience and description of the mother and daughter, suggests that an opinion, a reaction, a participation can play an equal part in experiencing art. Gordon approaches Alighiero e Boetti’s piece with intellectual cynicism, but finds in others’ pleasure the continuing life of the work. Since sociology examines social behaviors, permitting Gordon’s own field of study to intercept with her experience of art allows a new path of interest to develop, not at the exclusion of art history but with complementary information.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the *rhizome* operates on the principles of connection with heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography, and decalcomania, allowing disparate fields to be linked, mapped, and traversed. By producing connections between “semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles,” the rhizome is decentering.591 Is Avery Gordon the focus of her caption, the Alighieri e Boetti’s map on display, the mother and daughter that Gordon observes, or Boetti’s

590 Jacob, “Toward Cultural History,” 195.
educational efforts via mapping? Multiple strands are not related to a unifying element at a rooted center, but remain independent and even opposed. Association does not diminish difference but permits possibilities to be explored.

Gordon’s label for Alighiero e Boetti does not describe, inscribe, or circumscribe the work of art, but relates to it even as Gordon’s language clearly expresses her uncertain relationship to the piece. Not required to assert the work’s value, she can acknowledge its depressing history, especially in light of the war on terror sparked by 9/11 that has further devastated the region. Her text does not “represent” the work and thus avoids some of the concerns around how language dominates art. She includes her sociologist’s penchant to watch the milling spectators, but also art history through her free association of the artist’s efforts to educate his daughter. The tapestry comes full circle from its position on the wall of Tate Modern, through its socio-political qualities, into her observations on visitors to the museum, and thus to art historical fact, landing back in the discipline that houses the tapestry she is considering. The work cycles, “full of life.”

Gordon’s personal caption ruptures expectations around captions. Her sociological approach of noticing people’s responses to the work, as well as her own, decenters the art historical information about the artist, the craft of the work, its period and style of art; “the rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines.”92 Tate Modern manages this by providing both captions so that viewers can select how they wish to engage Mappa del Mondo, but the narrative of Gordon’s caption is also

92 ibid, 9.
ruptured by the many fields she introduces, her personal taste, history, sociology, metaphor, biography.

A map open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, a group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.... A map has multiple entryways.593

Edney identifies how Deleuze and Guattari do not “question the manner in which maps are constructed” and so participate in the naturalization of maps.594 A map is not unendingly open because it prescribes a center, a projection, both of which designate social and political preferences.595 Deleuze and Guattari recognize that concern, however, in their objection to any possible diagram of a rhizomatic mapping because that oversimplifies or fixes the investigative points that stay moving in their mapping.

The rhizome’s cartographic quality provides an extensive field of relations. Recent work on the theory behind cartography dispels such an innocent view of maps. Most people never question how a map is made, but accept that a map is “accurate, is truthful, does not contain errors, shows the lie of the land or the network of highways.”596 People accept as self-evident that maps are representations of reality, understood from an empiricist perspective, defined and judged by the information they present.597 Few question other interpretive possibilities. J.B. Harley radically changed the field of cartography with his arguments that maps provide empirical information within social constructions, despite the naturalization that they experience.598

593 ibid, 13.
595 ibid, 188.
Matthew H. Edney showed how the language surrounding maps compounds
denaturalizing efforts. The sentence “maps provide information” has “maps” as a subject and
agent.\(^{599}\) Maps cannot act, but are products of specific individuals or groups with selective
criteria determining map characteristics, which are interpreted by audiences, so that the “authors”
of a map are profoundly influential. Foucault questioned the plausibility of discerning the
intentions of the “author,” an issue for cartography and museum studies just as much as
literature, albeit complicated by the fact that the “author” in the former is shorthand, usually, for
a plurality of individuals.\(^{600}\) Alighieri e Boetti’s maps wove pink oceans in 1979, which
underlines the problem of who chooses what these maps show, who is their author, and therefore
complicates the intention of the information in these woven maps. The mappe are fraught with
the stresses of production and communication.

Cartography’s efforts at denaturalizing maps, and reflections on the theories behind map-
making, introduced approaches that “aim to look at both the constructive and the communicative
processes.”\(^{601}\) Revealing the concerns and preferences, political and semiotic, of the creator
undermines its unconditional accuracy. Accuracy and information become contextual. For such
reasons, Edney redefines maps to highlight their socio-political and intellectual construction:

A map is a representation of knowledge; the representation is constructed
according to culturally defined semiotic codes; the knowledge is constructed
using various intellectual and instrumental technologies; the knowledge and its
representations are both constructed by individuals who work for and within
various social institutions.\(^{602}\)

---

\(^{599}\) Edney, “Theory and History,” 188.
\(^{600}\) Michel Foucault, “What is an Author,” in The Foucault Reader, trans. Paul Rabinow. (New York: Pantheon
\(^{601}\) Casti, “Theory of Interpretation,” 2.
\(^{602}\) Edney, “Theory and History,” 189.
I need not reiterate here the various contemporary concerns with artists who use others’ labor, nor the issues of authenticity faced by Renaissance scholars of artists with large studio practices. Alighieri e Boetti’s map is a “representation of knowledge” with all the complications that Edney then expounds. But, let us take a step back and consider Edney’s definition of a map. Is it not remarkably similar to the descriptions of wall text discussed at the beginning of this chapter? Wall text is a representation of the knowledge available to study the work. The text is conceived within the paradigm of a certain disciplinary language code, and has its own language restrictions. Wall text is written by several individuals, and yet, like the maps in Edney’s example, we often hear “the wall text says” or “wall text shares information.” Wall text, as an inanimate object, does not share information. Curators do through the wall text, and yet the wall text becomes the subject and agent. The writers and editors of these brief texts disappear, and are rarely known or acknowledged.

My argument is that museum wall text is, like maps, naturalized through its benign display, anonymous author, and syntax. A museum wall caption represents knowledge constructed according to the disciplinary codes of art history. The text is produced by several people in different departments of the museum, each with different concerns regarding the text, but all of whom must subscribe to the curatorial vision for the show, as it fits into the mission of the museum as a whole. The wall text maps for the viewer how to look at and think about individual art objects, as well as their presence within a show or a thematic gallery room. Recognizing that wall text is not neutral allows other perceptual paths to be sought and considered, other voices to be included in the museum’s celebration of its art collection.
Interdisciplinary work can allow us to reflect on standard attitudes and ideas within the primary field of study. The work denaturalizing maps can help alter how wall text is perceived, and perhaps revitalize it with new interpretive possibilities. If one path of inquiry stalls, the whole inquiry process does not need to break down. Another context of knowledge can be applied.

A map that contains the academic disciplines, the artifacts of museum culture, and viewers’ memories and cultural histories as geographical sites, provides multiple points of access to multiple sites of visitation. [...This] enables museum viewers’ agency within the contemporary cultural life as they learn to interconnect and traverse these various contexts of knowledge.

Museum visitors can use the vast scholarship of the art historical discipline, the objects within the museum, their own experience, upbringing, knowledge, and relationships to engage art in the museum. In this instance, sociology, cartography, and art history were able to intermingle to add complexity not only to Alighieri e Boetti’s work of art, but also to highlight the current limitations in how captions are conceived. Douglas Crase’s “Blue Poles,” about Jackson Pollock’s 1953 painting, with which I opened the essay, offers an analogy of what a museum caption can do. We try to decipher the tangled lines of the road map, allowing ourselves a personal view of the landscape, even as we try to better understand its topographical depiction. Suddenly we are found, or rather we find ourselves before something familiar, some color, some memory, some person that can “bring back the sense of it,” at which point, the geography unfolds beyond the map.

---

604 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 246.
CHAPTER IV.4

CRITICAL CUTS EXPAND SPECTATORSHIP

The American Philosophical Association defined critical thinking in their 1990 “Consensus Statement Regarding Critical Thinking,” claiming that it is a “powerful resource in one’s personal and civic life.”

While not synonymous with good thinking, Critical Thinking is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit.605

Critical inquiry requires active engagement with the material for thought. Through the process of being critical, the autobiographical and personal perceptions can intervene “in the historical content of museum culture” by offering relevant revelations.606

Charles Garoian’s recommendations for alternative engagements with art in the museum, as discussed in “Performing the Museum,” do not included critical inquiry per se. He places critical thinking as a subset to autobiography, but I would like to show how critical thinking is key to the significance of the Bigger Picture project, and that project’s importance over all. Perception is noticing what one is experiencing, but critical inquiry begins to consider the how and why of that reaction. The autobiographical response, the perceptive engagement must then

become the object of thought. Understanding one’s self, as well as the museum’s culture and institutional role, can help produce a more acute understanding of how a work is producing its effect. Rather than arguing about what the work “means,” the goal is to recognize the thinking process that occurs in front of the work of art.

The neuroscientist Colin Blakemore describes his surprise at Lucio Fontana’s *Spatial Concept: Waiting*, before walking through the steps of why a slashed canvas could be considered a work of art. Rather than blatantly accepting that it must be art because it is in a museum, he reflects on what determines a work of art as such and questions how art works.

What’s happened here? A canvas slashed in Tate Modern! But don’t call the police. Instead, reflect on the nature of pictures. They are paradoxes—ambiguous objects with multiple meaning. A picture is a thing in its own right—a sheet of stretched canvas, constrained in a frame. But the pigments for other materials that are usually spread on its surface evoke other, imagined perceptions. The surface is flat; yet the impressions created may be solid. The surface is now and here; the perceptions may be in the past, in the future, in heaven or in hell. Lucio Fontana’s picture forces the viewer to confront the paradox. No pigment disguises the harsh reality of its canvas. And the gash allows us to peer into the space behind it—only to find no other world, only the space behind it. Fontana teases the brain. He glorifies an anarchic act of violence against nothingness. He challenges our comfortable notion of what a work of art is.

His musing on how Fontana “challenges our comfortable notion of what a work of art is” produces a discussion that might allow the work to become accessible for those who are appalled by its seeming violence and disdainful of its lack of figure or paint. Blakemore’s critical inquiry about this work introduces another viewer to how reflections on non-traditional, non-figurative art are themselves an effective means of engagement.

The informational museum caption of Tate Modern claims that the “carefully pre-meditated” slashes are “drawing the viewer into the space,” but the caption does not explain how “the force of the gesture” draws “the viewer into space.”
In 1959, Fontana began to cut the canvas, with dramatic perfection. These cuts (or *tagli*) were carefully pre-meditated but executed in an instant. Like the holes in some of his other canvases, they have the effect of drawing the viewer into space. In some, however, the punctures erupt from the surface carrying the force of the gesture towards the viewer in a way that is at once energetic and threatening. Although these actions have often been seen as violent, Fontana claimed ‘I have constructed, not destroyed.’

The nature of the traditional caption is to present information about the art or artist, not to outline a possible form of interaction. The museum does not want to force a viewer to process the work in a particular way, but in refusing to be expressive can undermine the radical power of a work for those unprepared to experience it (somewhat like being given an algebra problem without any explanation of how to solve for x). There is the danger that someone might take Blakemore’s response as the only approach, but the humorous opening not to call the police, and the use of “our,” at the end, are reminders that this is a conversation about the work rather than an authoritative lecture.

Blakemore expressly reevaluates what art is, and how it ought to be considered in reaction to Fontana’s slashed canvas. For those of us who may forget the transgressive nature of Fontana’s slashed canvas, Blakemore’s caption revitalizes what an outrage it was. The language of the museum label moderates the energy and violence of Fontana’s *Spatial Concept: Waiting*, while Blakemore’s label expresses the courage and cunning in the piece. The work remains poignant and vital. Rather than accepting Fontana’s piece simply because it is situated in the museum, Blakemore’s shock leads to a thoughtful evaluation of its presence, and his caption leads viewers to question their own “comfortable notions of what a work of art is.”

The Art Reception Survey (ARS) “assesses an aesthetic experience toward an artwork with respect to affective and cognitive factors as well as concomitant factors known for their
relevance in the process of an aesthetic experience." They found that cognitive stimulation was key to a positive aesthetic response, which is unrelated to positive attraction (when someone likes the work). A positive aesthetic response is a completed aesthetic judgment, which involves perceptual analysis, memory integration, explicit classification, cognitive mastering (extracting meaning), and finally evaluation. In the results of the study, the team at the University of Heidelberg reference many other studies that have found intellectual engagement crucial to a positive experience with art, but the ARS differentiates between the constituents of an aesthetic experience, identifying not only the personal preference of the viewer but also other aspects of their subjective appreciation, such as levels of engagement that might influence their judgment.

Their study identified five factors that influence art reception: cognitive stimulation, negative emotionality, expertise, self-reference, artistic quality, positive attraction. The last factor, when a painting is described as “beautiful, pleasant, and valuable,” influenced art naives cognitive and affective output, while also correlating positively with expertise. Beauty and knowledge will encourage a viewer to spend more time reflecting on a work of art. Unsurprisingly, self-reference was common in art naives, who likely lacked the art specific information that would allow them to think about the work, and yet “it appeared that only participants who engage in art-related activities had a sense of personal connection to an artwork.” Someone unaccustomed to art activities would not make a personal connection with

---

609 ibid., 329.
610 ibid., 329. The researchers use the term “naives” for those who are new to the art world. Other terms, such as neophytes or newcomers, might be less awkward, but I chose to keep the researcher’s terminology for consistency while I am discussing their study and analysis.
611 ibid., 330.
an art work, suggesting that a personal connection with art only develops over repeated experience and viewing. The self is not where we begin, but where we arrive.

Overall, the literature on aesthetic reception repeatedly finds that “the extraction of meaning and the understanding of a piece of art, has an essential influence on its overall reception,” that is spending time thinking about a work of art alters, positively, what you think about it. Blakemore’s shocked question, followed by his recommendation to think is precisely how a naive viewer (one who might be shocked as he was) could come to have a positive aesthetic experience, where the process of evaluation as described by the ARS leads through consideration of the art work into a discovery of the self and the self’s evaluative preferences, which includes a vast range of cultural, educational, personal, religious, and political factors. Blakemore’s invitation to reconsider the slashed canvas is also an opportunity to develop “openness to experience,” as described by the NEO-PI-R personality questionnaire, a trait that obviously seeks new experiences, and therein new people, places, and things to consider —“individuals with higher openness to experience scores have a greater interest in art.”

The art historian Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf wrote about the “conditions and the qualities of knowledge realized in interpretation of artworks,” and found that “what is experienced in the artwork—its core meaning—often appears through an interplay between features of the work and the interpreter’s involvement or interest.” The semiotician Charles Sanders Pierce likewise proposed that the interpretation of a sign was influenced by the person

---

612 “Items regarding art attitudes assessed if a participant for example enjoys going to museums, reads art literature, has had art education in school, or paints as a hobby.” Hager et al., “Art Reception Survey,” 327. Going to a museum qualifies as an art activity and the Bigger Picture captions authors’s relationship with Tate Modern may explain their willingness to interject their own account.
interpreting, which makes the interpreted sign distinct from the original sign; a sign “creates in
the mind of that person an equivalent sign...the interpretant of the first sign.” Lagerlöf’s query
into the cognitive dimensions of interpretation recommends acknowledging the two pathways
necessary to an interpretation, where one depends on relating to the work of art through art
historical information while the second path breeds awareness of one’s perceptions. Using this
“difference as a starting point” places the viewer-thinker in an oscillation, between “two modes
of reception that compares the two.” This meta-position will challenge and strengthen viewers
observations by requiring them to work back and forth without allowing any one to dominate.

Garoian explains that critical inquiry is intended to utilize as many thinking pathways as
possible, to expand intellectual horizons by engaging and applying multiple methods of thought.

A multicentric process, critical inquiry occurs at the conjunction of perceptual, autobiographical, cultural, inter-disciplinary, and institutional content, a complex
and contradictory assemblage whereby a comprehensive understanding of
museums and their artifacts in contemporary cultural life is made possible.

Such varied analytic tools introduce possibilities of how art functions beyond its prescribed role
in art history. Certainly an art historian, critic, or gallerist could write something akin to
Blakemore’s caption. The author, art critic, and occasional Professor of Art, Dave Hickey
notoriously writes about art and culture in a flip manner that is meant to engage his readers with
his critical attitude and inspire theirs. Most of the time, art spaces conform to the styles and

---

617 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 238.
expectations of art history and art theory, made apparent by the fact that Tate Modern is the only major museum to offer an interpretive approach such as Bigger Picture.619

In all these instances, critical inquiry is a linguistic process. Articulation is key to external confirmation of the personal engagement with a work of art. Though there are countless difficulties in the accuracy of verbal language to discuss the visual, we depend on utterances to show that the spectator has considered the work. Through language, the speaker’s curiosity and critical capacity become apparent as viewers begin “to problematize the propositional aspects of a work of art and to bring their own cultural perspectives to bear.”620

John Dewey presented a five-stage process for inquiry to outline how someone negotiates a conflict into resolution.

1. a problematic situation
2. articulation of the problem
3. hypothesis suggestion
4. deduction of consequences
5. testing of the hypothesis

In the first step of inquiry, something interrupts the accustomed way of thinking. Garoian explains this stage as “an existential situation of indeterminateness or internal conflict in which the inquirer experiences a felt difficulty just because customary ways of thinking or acting are blocked.”621 Such a disturbance will trigger the person to desire a solution, leading to the second stage of Dewey’s process: a need to articulate the difficulty. Blakemore’s caption speeds through these steps. The opening question expresses the problem, and the second sentence defines it. His

---

619 Small museums have occasionally done specific shows of this sort as a community outreach. The most notable is Yale’s Museum of Fine Art, which produced a show of this sort with the assistance of the poet and professor of English John Hollander, who requested poetry responding to the collection. The Poet’s Eye was published to correspond with the show.
620 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 239.
621 ibid., 243.
hypothesis—“reflect on the nature of picture”—leads him to take stock of what he knows or believes about art. When he considers their implications for Fontana’s work, he is testing his hypothesis of what art is, and concludes his critical inquiry with the realization that Fontana “challenges our comfortable notion of what art is.”

Applying language to the visual experience is the struggle of ekphrasis, defined as “the verbal representation of visual representation” by the scholar of visual culture W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *Picture Theory*. Garoian matches Dewey’s five steps to Mitchell’s three ways of relating to ekphrasis. The first two steps in Dewey’s chain relate to Mitchell’s “ekphrastic indifference,” when the viewer is struggling to put visual images into language and realizes that “words can cite but never sight their objects.” In the following instance, Alain de Botton grapples with describing Giacometti’s *Four Figures on a Base*.

For centuries, sculptors have attempted to fashion—in bronze or in marble—true representations of what human beings look like. But Giacometti seems to care little for that project. His figures are all out of proportion, the heads too long, the bodies too spindly.

Alain de Botton starts with a discussion of the historical work of sculpture, though the first sentence already struggles with the uncertainty at how Giacometti’s sculpture can be compared to earlier representational works. His phrasing that sculptors “attempted to fashion” intrudes a note that perhaps they did not represent truthfully the human figure, though that was their supposed intent and accomplishment. Struggling to articulate Giacometti’s effort, de Botton uses contrast and comparison—“out of proportion” or “too long.” Only “too spindly” seems to

---

be a specific descriptor of the sculptures, but even so they are “too” much and require the reader to imagine something less spindly.

Mitchell’s “ekphrastic hope” occurs when the viewer seems to find language for art, when metaphor, association, and the imagination offer a potential leap across the divide. Garoian suggests that this corresponds to Dewey’s third step (hypothesis suggestion) and fourth step (deduction of consequences). Alain de Botton hypothesizes that Giacometti is interested in something positive, a sense of hopefulness entering his speech when he rejects his earlier statements with “and yet” or “nevertheless just as interested.”

And yet this sculptor is nevertheless just as interested in producing a truthful representation of a human being as Michelangelo. It’s just that he has taken on board the central insight of modern art: that it is by distorting what we take to be the real appearance of something that we can often get closest to its true reality.

The final Dewey stage of testing the hypothesis, through observation, data gathering, and imagination, leads to Mitchell’s “ekphrastic fear” described as “the moment of resistance or counterdesire when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse.” The verbal deductions no longer seem certain and viewers begins to doubt the ability of their phrasing to capture or present what they see. After the certainty expressed in his statement about the “central insight of modern art,” Alain de Botton concludes:

These figures on a base may not look like anyone we know—but they are powerfully alive nevertheless.

Doubt returns. The works do not look human because of the shape of the head or the body; they are too long, too spindly. The figures may not look quite human, certainly not like “anyone we know,” and yet the distorted shapes reveal something “powerfully alive.” That something, and

---

623 Mitchell, Picture Theory, 152-3.
624 Mitchell, Picture Theory, 154.
what being “powerfully alive” might mean, remains unexpressed, lost in the “nevertheless.” His swinging back and forth across positives and negatives shows the challenge of putting language and thought onto a non-linguistic work.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey discusses how the works of Cézanne or Matisse attempt some kind of visual problem solving. Inquiry is not only endemic to certain art practices, but viewers who engage their own critical faculty may better understand the visual problems that artists struggle to resolve. Colin Blakemore’s work on Fontana’s piece shows how critical thinking can discover and offer insight, as Alain de Botton’s attempt to describe Giacometti’s sculpture shows how difficult it is to offer a “truthful representation” of people and artworks. Their hesitations and uncertainty reveal the complexities of these art works and suggest others can struggle to makes sense of them too.

In 1959, Gerhard Richter was on a state sponsored art trip to Kassel in West Germany, and saw an exhibition of works by Jackson Pollock and Luciano Fontana. He would later claim that “those paintings were the real reason I left the GDR [German Democratic Republic].” Fontana’s work must have made Richter think, though about what precisely we cannot be sure. The critical thinking, however, urged him to leave the “long-calcified dictates of Socialist Realism,” and become a true iconoclast, producing work that is “an active resistant to ideological category, a continued refusal to be squeezed into the perimeters of the very theories that, ironically, have helped to catapult him onto the aesthetic mountain where he now finds himself,” as Siri Hustvedt describes it. The same could be said of Poussin’s paintings, of T.J. Clark’s

---

626 As quoted in Hustvedt, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, 49.
writing about art, where we began, and of those that followed. All of these writers have suggested that a thoughtful engagement with art does not then claim to know it.

I have never loved a painting I could master completely. My love requires a sense that something has escaped me. This quality of cryptic excess may be responsible for the language people use to talk about seeing art, as if an inanimate thing were endowed with an elusive, almost sacred power.  

Hustvedt’s comment sums up the way an inability to articulate the experience with art imbues it with the divine. Perhaps critical inquiry begins with the divine. Michael Baxandall in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* outlines the five stages of the Angelic Colloquy, when Mary learns of her Divine Conception: 1) *Conturbatio* (disquiet); 2) *Cogitatio* (reflection); 3) *Interrogatio* (inquiry); 4) *Humiliatio* (submission); 5) *Meritatio* (merit). This process is surprisingly similar to Dewey’s five stages. The method by which we think about art may have much to do with what we think about art. If we approach art as we approached spiritual quandaries, we may well find that we can only express divine awe. When critics talk about art history having a western slant, this deeply embedded Christian intellectual tradition at work in art history is a part of their concern. What can we neither see nor think because we are agape in an Angelic Colloquy? I do not mean to suggest that Dewey’s critical thinking, or the W.J.T. Mitchell’s similar ekphrastic triangle (leaving aside here the obvious neo-Aristotelian metaphysical associations of the Christian tradition), have not proved inordinately useful. I think it is self-evident that they have. The process of critical thinking, however, can not accept itself uncritically. It must consider alternative hypotheses—at least occasionally.

Colin Blakemore and Alain de Botton’s Bigger Picture captions reveal an internal five stage critical thinking apparatus, which follows the method of inquiry proposed by Dewey, but the captions themselves are outside the mode of inquiry. All the Bigger Picture captions insert an alternative approach, and one that I argue is critical to the ongoing relevance of art and art history.

The world of museums has produced a cult of expertise and mythos of greatness that weight the ordinary pleasure of looking at art and responding to it with an alarm about ignorance. [Catalogs, audio guides, captions] are all reminders to the viewer that he goes it alone at his own peril, that seeing is not enough, and perhaps worst of all, that without coaching the art hanging on the walls will be unintelligible to the onlooker.630

When the viewer can free a personal response, the work can develop new dimensions. What might happen when visitors find the museum open and welcoming, inviting personal and cultural reflection? What might be revealed about how we see art objects if we could be more honest about our private notions of them? What might we learn to examine differently? What might scholars begin to study?

Mieke Bal writes that “cultural objects are not the exclusive property of a discipline or institution” as a reminder that the works in the museum, though tended by those trained in a discipline and through an institution, are available for an audience whose experiences go far beyond that paradigm.631 Recognizing these diverse audiences will ensure “the health, even the survival” of any discipline, as it permits “innovations—which may appear as alienations” to keep against stultification.632 At first, audiences can be surprised to find information about the work of art and an alternate, biased, particular impression of the work of art presented on the museum

630 Hustvedt, Mysteries of the Rectangle, xxi.
632 ibid., 8.
walls. Rather than cutting off such exuberant experiences of art, or minimizing them as Tate Modern has, a museum can promote this expansive approach by explaining its existence in its informational materials, in articles, and among their patrons.

They can invite high profile caption submitters, much as Tate Modern initially proposed, to bring notice to these efforts. They could select wall text captions from those submitted by museum attendees to be displayed for a period of the year. They could invite classrooms to visit and challenge students to write a provocative caption about a work of art, which teachers could later request enhanced with research materials. All these members of “museum culture,” as Garoian terms it, can encourage audiences to come to the museum and experience the work of art beyond the purview of museum culture.

The more abandon and enjoyment experienced, the more scrutiny in the analysis is required. And maybe the idea of emotional impetus motivating a need for analytical clarity also leads beyond the opposition, allowing intense feeling together with thought: a special kind of emotional engagement as a feature of distinctive thinking, not as its different counterpart.⁶³³

The goal is not to reject the scholarship being done, nor the “crafts and skills that traditional art history prides itself on. Those skills may be acquired differently. They may also be used differently.”⁶³⁴ There are so many ways to put in question the structure of our beliefs about how to look at a work of art and what to say about it.

When treated as a writerly text, and not just a mode of description or information, what is written on the wall can provoke a receptive and associative state of mind. Labels have the potential of art itself, to be sensual, smart and experiential.⁶³⁵

---

⁶³⁵ Schaffner, “Wall Text,” 167. Schaffner quotes “the opening didactic” for the Metropolitan Museum’s 1995 show “Bloom” as an example of great prose that introduced the show while also setting the tone of the work on display. Praising Richard Martin’s style of writing “full of his own pleasure in knowledge, in words, and in the act of interpretation,” Schaffner’s word choice indicates that wall text, even when “erudite and expansive,” is inevitably conveying information, an interpretation, and thus influential.
Wall text, large panels or brief captions, can be eloquent and evocative. To suggest that museums only provide dry or boring material is false (despite some critics’ virulent articles to the contrary) and not to the point. Rather, intentionally interesting language allows creative captions to become a possibility. The personal responses above are one approach but an inventive, fictionalized or poetic text can also engage an audience, perhaps precisely by reassuring them that art appreciation can be what you make it.\textsuperscript{636} Many of the inventive captions included within the Bigger Picture project are astounding. Creative responses are rare perhaps because museum culture is so strong that imaginative responses seem childish, and therefore not acceptable within the seemingly elite and educated realm of the museum. If art that seems childish has since been understood, then perhaps seemingly childish responses full of subjective preference need reconsideration as well.

Works of art are not beyond reproach, but they remain “only accessible to both the beholder and the scholar under conditions that are mostly safeguarded by institutions and that, in themselves, require certain patterns of behavior.”\textsuperscript{637} So long as they are being “conserved, preserved, and secured for posterity, works of art represent the potential to dialogue with history; for us to expose, examine, and critique cultural codes.”\textsuperscript{638} Societies shift and change. Though art has been displayed one way, there is no reason that new approaches might not be more

\textsuperscript{636} I wonder sometimes if the reason people don’t go to the museum, preferring a movie for example, is because the museum experience is framed as being learned rather than playful and pleasurable.
\textsuperscript{638} Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 236.
efficacious for today’s audiences. New cultural myths are inevitable. Considering the individuality of the twenty-first century audience coming from a culture accustomed to learning by choice, museums may benefit by encouraging audiences to have their own reactions.

Certainly the Bigger Picture captions reveal that audiences can respond to works independently. Of course most of the caption writers have an established relationship to Tate Modern—that is how they were selected to participate in this project—and that may explain their greater ease in sharing their point of view. Nevertheless, a number of other captions providers were day visitors brought by a senior citizens outreach program or were participants in a Tate community learning program. As visitors who wanted to know more about the museum, they learned that a personal response was not only appropriate but even desirable. The invitation to share reveals why someone may not like a work, what kind of information makes it become more available, or what associations it reveals. The museum learns more about its visitors, just as another visitor learns through the Bigger Picture caption series that there are many approaches to art, including her own.

Bigger Picture undermines the museum’s authority, but ironically those slices into the establishment may be the means to stitch together a new critical culture of penetrating commentators. The caption project suggests that museum attendees can bring new ways of thinking about art into museum culture—slicing through the idea of a separate, rarified institution. Works of art may not have resolutions or meaning; critical thinking encourages viewers to accept that instability by carving new ways of thinking. Finding the places of one’s

---

639 Many are advocating for digitized information, and the Australian museum NoMA responds to this development by providing its guests with an iPod for their tour. Museums may soon develop apps through which information could be disseminated. Information about the work, the artist, other similar works or artists, commentary on the work, and music can be selected by the museum attendee to complement the viewing experience they favor. Discerning how to best share knowledge shifts the museum’s focus from trying to establish what audiences should know to learning how to provide information that will engages today’s audience.
own certainty and resistance in relation to the works can benefit the general relationship to art by inserting new perspectives. Just as Fontana cut through the concepts of painting, so Tate Modern’s Bigger Picture captions cut through the unilateral vision of the museum. Both cuts are controlled, yet still manage to “challenge our comfortable notion of what a work of art is.”
SECTION V: CONCLUSION

ATTENTION NOW!

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING

I.
The painter’s eye follows relation out.
His work is not to paint the visible,
He says, it is to render visible.
-from “The Painter Dreaming in the Scholar’s House” by Howard Nemerov

In 1977, Svetlana Alpers concluded her essay “Is Art History?” with the “daunting
question”: “how does one justify such an occupation as looking?” Forty years later, the question
remains. Is it not an elitist luxury to look at art when famine, disease, and war are rampant? T.J.
Clark’s suggestion to slow down and think about looking is one response to the pervasive
urgency that leads to hurried decisions and, often, errors of judgment. Simic might answer that
looking is a creative opportunity, a chance not only to see but envision more than what is. Proust
would have argued for the importance of an aesthetic sensibility in a true appreciation of this
mortal coil. William Carlos Williams, with Bruegel, encourages us to see it all, and record it,
while DeLillo might suggest that looking at art is not to see it all, and that the distinction
between art and life remains, even as it is necessarily blurred. Museums argue that art gives us a
tangible history.

Living in a city that claims “If you see something, say something,” I argue that the
occupation of looking has become very important. We know people are inattentive. We know
that they are influenced in what they say about what they see. Attentive looking, however, is presented as a matter of national security. But, I won’t stop there, with the government’s various warnings of black backpacks and subtle recommendations towards racial profiling. A citizenry that can see what is happening can speak to its necessary change, while an inattentive political body will be blindsided.

The gallerist Michael Findlay, in *The Value of Art* (2013), identifies how little art audiences are certain of what they see, dependent upon placards in museums to instruct them. The literary critic James A.W. Heffernan suggested the same two decades earlier in his *Museum of Words*: “from titles we move to curatorial notes on the museum wall, to catalogue entries to exhibition reviews, to the explanatory reproductions, and to the pages of art history. Synecdochically, the museum signifies all the institutions that select, circulate, reproduce, display, and explain works of visual art, all the institutions that inform and regulate our experience of it—largely by putting it into words.” Right now, people see what they are told to find. Representations of the signs of terrorist activity are provided in representative catch-phrases, just as many viewers in museums see what they read is there. Moving away from representation does not mean dissolving into a simulacrum, nor does it mean clinging to some original reality.

Using assorted texts about art, I have examined the problems of seeing and speaking, and reinforced the value of presence. The work of art is an opportunity for the viewer to develop a heightened relationship to her perceptual abilities, and begin questioning how illusion and reality work together in what she sees. These writers made extraordinary attempts to articulate what

---

they see, in the form of mimetic description or abstract invention. Rather than reiterate the visual image, they recognized the influence of their reason and imagination, incorporating it into their rendition conscientiously. Across the texts, I have suggested that alternative writing on art invites the reader/viewer to be more attentive, not only of word and image, but also how she thinks, what she imagines and believes. She is asked to pay attention.

This phrase is not haphazard, but points to the 19th Century’s “emergent economic system that demanded attentiveness of a subject.”641 Jonathan Crary in an article for October explains how “the prominence of attention as a problem, beginning in the late 1870s, is a sign of a generalized crisis in the status of the perceiving subject.”642 The a priori cognitive unity proposed by Kant (and supposed in various forms by earlier thinkers) collapsed as reality maintenance became associated with a “contingent and merely psychological faculty of synthesis” whose failure indicated mental pathology. This failure was judged on a growing body of research that identified a specific model of behavior as normal. The quality of attentiveness was attached to this behavioral norm, and became something to observe, measure, classify— another example of the 19th Century’s institutionalization and control of the human subject, when “a normative observer is conceptualized, not only in terms of the objects of attention, but equally in terms of what is not perceived.”643 Sight becomes a matter of what should be seen. Karl Marx used the camera obscura as a metaphor for describing the altered vision of “false consciousness.”644

It is possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as a continual crisis of attentiveness, to see the changing configurations of capitalism pushing attention

642 Crary, 25.
643 Crary, 26.
644 Julia Thomas, Reading Images (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2001), 7.
and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with unending introduction of new products, new sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then responding with new methods of managing and regulating perception.\textsuperscript{645}

The cultural logic of capitalism, Crary continues, requires that “we accept as natural switching out attention rapidly from one thing to another.”\textsuperscript{646} Looking carefully lengthens our attention, in violation of the rapid movements of a capitalist marketplace.

That speed forces us to accept notions of how to pay attention, our change purse spilling with each new jingle. Siri Hustvedt describes the simplicity of images that require nothing:

In a culture flooded by facile images that race past us on a screen, peek out at us from magazines, or loom over us in a city street—pictures so heavily coded, so easily read that they ask nothing of us but our money—looking long and hard at a painting may allow us entry into the enigma of seeing itself.\textsuperscript{647}

When attention must be proffered with speed, we lose the opportunity to question not only how we want to pay attention, but also what we want to offer our attention for consideration, a phrasal formulation that reveals the shift from expenditure to reception that is inherently radical in a consumer culture. Only when our attention is re-appropriated can we begin to see and say what we think about what we see, beyond the normative confines unconsciously assumed more than a century ago.

Griselda Pollock wrote effusively on the the use and abuse of theory as it relates to art and art history, on its importance and need for change. Her comments still resonate.

No theory will protect us against our own mythologizing tendencies. For the former is often the intellectual farce of the latter. But a practice, committed to critical self-analysis and to the necessary tension between what the mind invents in the way it thinks and the political effects of the logical structures we produce for representing the concrete, social world and analyzing historically those

\textsuperscript{645} Crary, 22.
\textsuperscript{646} Crary, 23 his emphasis.
\textsuperscript{647} Hustevedt, 9.
representations, such a practice may get us somewhere. But then, we will need other insights into the ways in which we cannot ultimately trust what we think we are doing.648

In the context of this historical appraisal of attention, art history’s disciplinary formulation about how to describe and interpret art become laden with another set of ethics and politics. I can only imagine the struggle that writers faced in articulating the visions of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. As before, but perhaps even more so, a desire for terms and a language, to manage these visionary explorations, must have felt dire. A language code helped validate these works of art, as it still does. In itself, this is no problem. Alpers comments that Sir Joshua Reynolds’ “understanding of many works of art was probably as much strengthened by [his] standards as his appreciation of others was hindered.”649 Likewise, my suggestion to include unusual forms of writing about art may serve to widen the field, while unwittingly causing other damage.

The standards developed and used by historians for the last several centuries are not bad because they have certain limitations. They simply have certain limitations—“habit of mind affects what works are studied as well as what is studied.” When alternate ways of seeing and speaking are refused, when attention must be structured and codified, or denied as pathological, whole areas of study and ways of studying are ignored, limiting intellectual possibility. Attentive extremes, too much or too little, are obviously problematic and may even be associated with psychosis. Attention’s nebulous nature drove the development of performative norms. But, these limited the dynamic process of attention. Now, we find ourselves in a culture that rigidly retains

rules (and seems to be ever imposing new ones), rather than cultivating far more complex individual and social systems that can manage the ebb and flow of attention.

Signs all over New York state “If you see something, say something,” and variants on the same exist internationally. If our culture requires—for our security—that we be able to see and describe what we see, then the ability to be able to observe carefully and articulate thoughtfully demands that we know how to do both. If cultural fields are interpreted as indicative of a nation’s interests, in the past, present and future, then subtle changes in visual culture can indicate socio-political change. Georgetown’s Foreign Policy School includes a specialist in cultural theory to ensure that future internationalists will be informed on how to recognize and manage cultural clues.

The work of art does more than formally protest the world, however. It reworks it, translates it, and for those who receive it, new meanings present themselves....In the emergence of new meanings, we encounter the world with better ears and eyes, and thus become better critics of what we had earlier regarded as sufficiently unproblematic, if not familiar, even known.650

Alternative forms of writing around art can provide new encounters. Such alternative texts, as I present, do not aim to superimpose on the text, but offer an example of the impact that the work had on one person, to be read with the possibility that the reader can develop her own reaction to the work.

Certain new combinations of form and content—to make us want to return to them, perhaps in order to remember what it was like to encounter them for the first time: this just is the aesthetic, and as such is profoundly ordinary (woven into the texture of human doings, from the child’s first need to sing the song or play the clapping game again), and probably beyond the reach of analysis. But I think writers about art should try harder before admitting defeat.651

651 Clark, The Sight of Death, 118.
Writing about art need not wallow in subjective trivialities, nor isolate in objective cool. Writing about art earnestly is difficult and cannot be formulated. These various experiments in art writing, and the fictions that I have interjected into the dialogue, offer a new day for our perceptions, our attention, and our ways of being.

Clark was wary that his recommendation might seem too sunny in these dark times. Likewise, I have no doubt that much of the world lives in the shadow of fear, and that many use language to manipulate and coerce. To see the light, to be “sunny” would be foolish only if blinded into believing that is all. The plurality of much post-modernist thought can be radiant when it introduces notions to be more thoughtful, more careful, more conscious of the rhizomatic webs we weave, wound in order to reveal new affiliations, rather than merely to repudiate past categorizations. The greater challenge, then, seems to me to attempt a recognition that all is not darkness, that there continues to be light even in the dark. I am reminded of a passage by Christopher Fry in an essay on comedy that may well best sum up the point Clark made.

There is an angle of experience, where the dark is distilled into light, either here or hereafter, in or out of time, when our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch. And comedy senses and reaches out to this experience. It says in effect, that groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance. And so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery.

Our fine work with art and life must continue, ever changing, now in thoughtfully tracing relations, other times in ecstatic effusions. To say what you see is to cycle back, seeking with each revolution a revelation, permitting a revelation its revolution of sight and insight.
SECTION VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY


Curtis, Penelope. “Out with the Thematic at Tate, in with the Chronological - The Art Newspaper.” The Art Newspaper, May 1, 2013. http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Time+is+right+to+rethink+the+chronological+hang/29360.


Elsner, Jas. “Art History as Ekphrasis.” Art History 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 10—27.


Fish, Stanley Eugene. Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.


———. “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” *Partisan Review,* August 1940.


Hainley, Bruce. *Under the Sign of [sic]: Sturtevant’s Volte-Face.* Los Angeles; Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2013.


Scott, Corinne. About Bigger Picture with Corinne Scott of Tate Modern. Interview by Charlotte Kent, June 21, 2013.


