

OCCASIONED TO WONDER: QUESTIONS OF ART AND LIFE AFTER THE DEATH
OF EVERYTHING

by MICHAEL TOD EDGERTON

Under the Direction of Jed Rasula

ABSTRACT

The critical portion of this dissertation looks at the compartmentalization of intellectual and aesthetic activity due to the rise of the academy and museum, and their detrimentally heightened state of specialized professionalization, in particular that of the artist and critic. Art has been alienated from its producers and audiences alike, producing a specialized discourse of criticism that can only appropriate art into the theoretical frameworks of aesthetic judgments, reducing them to functions of abstract principles of the idea of art. In this context, I inquire into the possibilities of a less appropriative mode of criticism, looking especially to the recent phenomenological turn in criticism for guidance, and testing the limit case proposition that the only legitimate criticism itself is artistic: the ekphrastic literary response or “translation” of art. As a critic searching out the proper landing point between methodological poles, I then look at artists Mark Dion and Olafur Eliasson, whose works attempt to activate the senses and a sense of community over and against “disinterested” critical discourse. As a

literary artist, myself, I then present my own work that, like Dion and Eliasson's, is both aesthetic and relational, opening a space for a kind of relational function within the aesthetic space of lyric writing, creating a hybrid genre literary art work that queries the ways people make meaning of their lives; struggle with doubt, pain, and fear; and forge connections with others and with the larger culture. The work formally enacts this self-other chiasmus through a problematizing of the traditional notion of isolated poetic "voice" and authorial agency.

INDEX WORDS: 20th and 21st century art, art and literary criticism, poetry, lyric essay, hybrid writing, participatory art, relational art, social practice art, aesthetics, modernity

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I pursue a life with moments of enchantment rather than an enchanted way of life. Such moments of enchantment can be cultivated and intensified by artful means.

Enchantment, as I use the term, is an uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity.

- Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*

CHAPTER 1

CABINET OF DISENCHANTED MODERNITY (EVERYBODY'S A CRITIC)

We have an etching that reproduces the *Wunderkammer* belonging to the German physician and collector Hans Worms, with the help of which we can gain a fairly precise notion of the appearance of a real cabinet of wonder. Alligators, stuffed gray bears, oddly shaped fish, stuffed birds, and canoes used by primitive peoples hang from the ceiling, at a considerable distance from the floor. The upper part of the back wall is taken up by spears, arrows, and other weapons of various shapes and origins. Between the windows of one of the side walls there are deer and elk antlers, animal hooves and skulls; on the opposite wall, in near proximity to one another, hang tortoise shells, snake skins, sawfish teeth, and leopard skins. From a certain height, all the way down to the floor, the walls are covered with shelves overflowing with shells, octopus bones, mineral salts, minerals, roots, and mythological statuettes. Only seemingly does chaos reign in the *Wunderkammer*, however: to the mind of the medieval scholar, it was a sort of microcosm that reproduced, in its harmonious confusion, the animal, vegetable, and mineral macrocosm. This is why the individual objects seem to find their

meaning only side by side with others, between the walls of a room in which the scholar could measure at every moment the boundaries of the universe.

(Agamben 29-30)

The cabinet (Italian: *gabinetto* and German: *Wunderkammer*) initially represented a personal space in which private possessions were placed for safekeeping. Its meaning changed from the sixteenth century, however, to become a square shaped room replete with artefacts, natural history specimens, medallions, botanical rarities, and sometimes paintings and sculptures. ... It is the latter mode of visibility which is said to have provided the morphology for the modern natural history museum. (Prior 58n1)

[M]ost historians would draw a line connecting the curiosity cabinet (the first universal collections, dating from the sixteenth century) to the modern museum, but the connection would be of a limited kind. It would underscore the similarity that both contain material collections, but would quickly enumerate a series of disconnects: the curiosity cabinet was private, the museum public; one was irrational and haphazard, the other orderly and systematic; one was merely pleasurable and personal, the other educational. (Robertson 43)

A telling indicator of the continuing functionalism of the arts [in seventeenth century Europe] was the absence of institutions like the art museum, the secular concert, or copyright, which today help set works of art apart from other cultural artifacts. ... Forerunners of the art museum, of course, were the large princely collections of painting or sculpture, although most were closed to all but a few artists or connoisseurs on invitation. The other precursor of the art museum was the "cabinet of curiosities," *studiolo*, or *Kunstammer*, a specially designed building or room in a princely palace for exhibiting clocks, scientific instruments, rare plants, and minerals alongside paintings, sculptures, and precious jewels. These assemblages were conceived on an encyclopedic principle reflecting the humanist ideal of knowledge, and the inclusion of painting and sculpture in them is one more sign that there was not yet a separate category of fine art.

(Shiner 72)

The same doctrine [that "all the various beauties in painting ultimately serve only to raise us step by step towards absolute beauty"] was exemplified by the new-formed art collections of the seventeenth century. The "picture cabinet" (*cabinet d'amateur*) that assembled ancient statues and "modern" paintings of all genres and styles was a training-ground where the art-lover would experience *the visible idea of art* [my emphasis]. (Belting 23)

[T]he experience of art can only be the experience of an absolute split. (Agamben 47)

* * *



Figure 1. Rosamond Purcell; *Bringing Nature Inside: 17th Century Natural History, Classification, and Vision*; Special Exhibition Gallery, Science Center, Harvard University; 2005 (a recreation of Ole Worm's Wunderkammer); n.d.; Web; 1April 2014. <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/>>.

“[W]hen the ancient Athenians first witnessed Antigone,” writes Larry Shiner in *The Invention of Art*, “they did so as part of a religious-political festival, the annual ‘City Dionysia.’ He goes on to point out that “the ancient Greeks, who had precise

distinctions for so many things, had no word for what we call fine art. The word we often translate as ‘art’ was *techne* which, like the Roman *ars*, included many things we would call craft” (19). Shiner and Agamben underscore a reading of “art” in ancient to medieval cultures as essentially not existing as such, but rather as part and parcel of a broader, more fundamental (and theological-magical) world view. There essentially was not the split between “art” and “life” we variously bemoan and celebrate today. Agamben claims, for instance, that love of art works for their own sake, as ends in themselves instead of as means of connection to the divine, was almost entirely unknown in the Middle Ages, and then only as aberration and impiety. Agamben spotlights the medieval *Wunderkammer* (see figure 1) as exemplifying this view. Paintings and sculptures in the cabinet of wonder are exhibited alongside such a bewildering array of objects as “an egg that a bishop found inside another egg, manna fallen from the sky during a famine, a hydra, and a basilisk” (Agamben 29). The single object finds meaning “only side by side with others” in such a panoply, like the signifier, only differentially, only in its relations to the other items in the collection, which serves “to measure at every moment the boundaries of the universe,” to index the larger natural and cultural world of the collector. Such an eclectic nature illustrates the lack of the discrete categories of human production we now call the “fine arts” and reveals such works (paintings, sculptures, etc.) to be mere fragments among other fragments—all of which fit together, if only in the omniocular vision of a god—of the

broader field, not of representation, but of the things of the world, and enjoying no special or “auratic” status of their own. When common Medieval men and women looked at paintings, sculptures, or heard poetry (which is more or less to say the Bible), the majority of which would be encountered within the walls of the Church, and when the princes and scholars contemplated the collections of the *Wunderkammer*, when medieval people gazed upon

the tympanum of the Vezelay cathedral, with its sculptures depicting all the peoples of the world in a single light of divine Pentecost, or the column of the Souvigny abbey, with its four sides reproducing the wonderful ends of the earth through the fabulous inhabitants of those regions ... he¹ had the aesthetic impression not that he was observing a work of art but rather that he was measuring, more concretely for him, the borders of his world. (Agamben 34)

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “art” as such, those practices that would be valorized as the “fine” arts and acquire the quasi-magical aura of Art with its own end and as individuated entirely from other fields of human production was only yet in its most embryonic stage, and was being borne out fully in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment drive to analytical classification. As Shiner delineates it, the split this would bring severed fine arts from crafts, art more and more from religious life,

¹ Rather than pock my pages with a hundred “sics,” please note well here and now my disdain and dismay, in a book written in the mid-1990’s, in the very late 20th century, at Agamben’s choice to continue the conflation-cum-inflation of the male/masculine pronoun with the universal. I will refrain from saying that it could be a result of his being an older white, straight, Italian man, in the unlikely event that this would oversimplify things.

and eventually, as Hegel was among the first to note, and as Agamben so deftly analyzes, both artist and spectator alike from the art work. Alongside the spectator, “[i]n our day, in the case of almost all peoples, criticism, the cultivation of [disinterested, Kantian] reflection, and ... freedom of thought have mastered the artists too. And have made them, so to say, a *tabula rasa*. ... No content, no form, is any longer immediately identical with the ... substantial essence of the artist” (Hegel, quoted in Agamben 36). The rise of an ethic of disinterested contemplation before the work of art enervates such interestedness and involvement as Shiner claims the Greeks enjoyed, and that would lead Plato to ban poetry and music from his Republic for fear of their overpowering effects on the rational spirit (such passionate and involved response devolves into the merely “interesting” in the long shadow of Enlightenment rationality). From this shadow or negative of art emerges that specialized, professionalized spectator, the critic.

There is now a split between art and daily life; art and the other fields of human inquiry, including science, history, mathematics, and philosophy; art and the spectator; critic and artist; and, indeed, art and the artist herself. The aesthetic subject, equally in its mode of artist and spectator-critic, is alienated from that “proper essence of his existence,” as Hegel puts it, “which he does not imagine for himself but which he *is*” and which exteriorizes or objectifies “in a living way out of his own resources” within and *as* the art work (Agamben 35). It is in this way that art becomes self-grounding,

auto-telic Art with the telling capital “A,” art as indifferent to the artist as the “man of taste” is to the art work itself.² This leaves the artist equally dependent upon and unsatisfied by the work as is the disinterested spectator, if differently or inversely so. The “Genius” of artistic subjectivity, placed above the materials of the work, installs art in a “higher” register than craft, transforming the work from a collaborative project that emerges from and renews communal bonds, and seals the artist off in her private pursuit of this Genius, as artists began to run after “an inaccessible ‘form’ that, they thought, contained the mysteries of art. The goal was no longer the perfected work,³ but the ceaseless perfection of an artistic vision that transcended simple visibility” and thus left the spectator-critic outside of its hermetic space (Belting 202). This alienation of artist from art work from critic inaugurates a tension and competition between the work and authority of art-making and criticism that persists—and thrives more than ever—today.

Agamben designates Kant’s third *Critique* as the foundation of this critical faculty and impetus of its subsequent trajectory in modern thought. Kant’s project stumbles in Agamben’s estimation insofar as it fails to realize that the critical judgment—in trying to articulate and define the art object—only negates it, producing only *logos* – reason

² On the rise of taste as a function of disinterested contemplation before the work of art, see Agamben’s third chapter on “The Man of Taste and the Dialectic of the Split” in *Man Without Content* and Shiner’s *The Invention of Art*, especially chapter. 7, “From Taste to the Aesthetic.”

³ “Closely connected to the emergence of the idea of the work as creation was a final transformation of the idea of the ‘masterpiece.’ Originally, a masterpiece was the piece by which an artisan/artist demonstrated to the guild that he or she was now a master of the art” (Shiner 125).

and language – only an interpretation of the work and not any *experience* of the work. We must therefore write the contemporary (non-)experience of art, always framed beforehand by our critical judgment, our theoretical assumptions (however explicit or unthematized) as under erasure: “~~art~~”. The critic has arisen in the Modern period as the “absolute will to be other,” and aesthetic judgment is the “pure split and lack of foundation that endlessly drifts on the ocean of form without ever reaching dry land” (Agamben 48). Through the mastering act of rational-theoretical interpretation, then, the critic negates her own subjectivity or subjectivating encounter with, her own potential experience of the work that an unmastering submission to its sensual-material, *aesthetic* elements would make possible, as well as the activation of her own *poietic* or creative capacities in the process. This is registered (and perhaps performatively issued, in part) by Kant’s observation that, unlike natural beauty (since we are a part of nature), we need a “concept of what the object should be ... when we judge artistic beauty, because the foundation of the work of art is something other than us [functioning as spectator-critics, I assume], namely, the free creative-formal principle of the artist” (45). And to this state we are all confined, even the artist who is only artist in the logical moment of creation (I am extrapolating, extending), the actual process of which and subsequent experience of which is shot through with this distanced and distancing aesthetic judgment, so that

one can never return to [the art work] from a state posterior to its creation [to an art work, I take it, prior to the establishment of “Art/~~art~~”]. ... Aesthetic judgment, much as it tries to repair the split that inhabits it, cannot escape this law ... of the degradation of artistic energy. ... [T]he accusation against which criticism [is] least able to defend itself would be precisely that has adopted an insufficiently self-critical stance, neglecting to ask about its own origin and its own meaning. (46)

Art has become equated with an impossible idea of “Art,” that “Invisible masterpiece” (to use Belting’s term) which can never be produced or, alternately, as the Duchampian anti-masterpiece that endlessly produces for its viewers nothing more than art’s non-productive, powerless status: ~~art~~. It is only when art appears in such negated form (as impossible, auratic idealization or anti-art critique) that art can persist at all, caught between these two poles and disconnected from all other areas of inquiry and cultural production (even when it reaches out to them within the walls of the gallery, even when it takes to the street, as “art”). Since Duchamp’s “ready-mades,” in fact, more and more art has taken an anti-aesthetic mode of ~~art~~ that is critical of the institutionalization and established aesthetic conventions of Art (especially the most auratic and Romantic associations attached to it, even while, in many instances, romanticizing its own transformative possibilities). In so doing, it has dispensed with the creative-formal principle of art *making*, often throwing the aesthetic babe completely

out the door along with its muddy bath water (the aesthetic does not descend from the clouds but falls fitfully from them to rise out of the muck). The spectator-critic approaches art and leaves behind only ashes, non-art. The artist approaches her materials, and can only fail to approximate an impossible ideal of the Masterpiece beyond them or cede her proper task of *poiesis* to the project of mere self-critique. Agamben uses the Greek root to distinguish it from its slimmer descendants, *poesia*, *poesie*, *poesy*, *poetry*, etc. *Poiesis*, from *poiein*, means “to bring into being” (Agamben 68). This *poiesis* is “what the Greeks considered the essence of the work—the fact that in it something passed from nonbeing into being, thus opening the space of truth (ἀ-λήθεια) and building a world for man’s dwelling on earth” and is not the “*operari* of the artist,” the praxes and processes, forms and operations in which her “creative genius ... finds expression” (Agamben 70). It is the most fundamental of creative capacities, the one which opens any space of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, any possibility of what we call, in the fullest sense, a “world,” a field of experience and shared significations and significances.

On Agamben’s account, our connections to a shared onto-theological and ethico-political fabric, the likes of which art once helped weave and into which it was woven, have unraveled with the supersession of art by the critical faculty and its concomitant alienation from itself. We therefore can no longer immerse ourselves in the work as before, nor build a shared world through and with it. The enjoyment of art has become

an extremely private or interior—and simultaneously distanced—experience for us; we no longer “penetrate its innermost vitality, identifying ourselves with it,” but can only approach it through the mediation of our critical faculties (Agamben 40). Agamben’s goal is to rethink aesthetics and art practices so as to recover the “original structure of the work of art” in which the human being can find herself as such, as “a being capable of action and knowledge” and once again capable of taking measure of our shared world, that world, I think he means, which is most fully created in our interactions with and ascriptions of significance and signification to it—the lived world, a combination of both the given and the made (102). He asks, in the context of this split which constitutes the “aesthetic” per se for Agamben, whether we might be “in the presence of the transformation in the essential status of the work of art,” and I intend to here take this question seriously in thinking about contemporary art practices and in engaging in my own. It must also be asked whether criticism itself is—or should be—undergoing such a fundamental transformation. Which is to ask, as I understand Agamben, not how we can repair an irreparable split, but inhabit it differently.

CHAPTER 2

EXPOSING ONESELF: A CRISIS OF CRITICISM AND THE QUEST FOR ENCOUNTER

Thus the birth of taste coincides with the absolute split of “pure Culture”: the spectator sees himself as other in the work of art, his being-for-himself as being-outside-himself; and in the pure creative subjectivity at work in the work of art, he does not in any way recover a determinate content and a concrete measure of his existence, but recovers simply his own self in the form of absolute alienation, and he can possess himself only inside this split. (Agamben 37)

There is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old. We know all too well the well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion. ... [D]efamiliarizing has lapsed into doxa, no less dogged and often as dogmatic as the certainties it sought to disrupt. And what virtue remains in the act of unmasking when we know full well what lies beneath the mask? More and more critics are venturing to ask what is lost when a *dialogue with* literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis, when the

remedial reading of texts loses all sight of why we are drawn to such texts in the first place. (Felski 1, my emphasis)

I contend that art-writing must sever the all-too-tight connections between disciplinary dogmas, such as those relating to influence, context, iconography, and historical lineage. [A]rt-writing ought to put the art first.

... When we see with intelligence, the question becomes not where the work comes from, but what the work *is*, *means*, and *does* in the present time of viewing. [T]he primary lack in traditional art-writing is the absence of a close engagement with the work itself. Whereas in the more traditional approaches to art, works of art are more often than not illustrations to an intellectual argument, here they come first. [T]he closer the engagement with the work of art, the more adequate the results of the analysis will be, *both* in terms of that particular work *and* as an account of the process of looking. ... This text aims to make a case for such an *attitude*—if that is the right word—toward the process or *work* of art as being the most adequate subject of art-writing. (Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider* xi-xiii)

The subject is pulled into the vortex of reflection and description; like the work, it is not simply given but is itself *at stake*. Criticism is not a record of an experience

that lies in the past and whose features await documentation; it is, rather, the arena for developing the experience. I may know that I have something to say about a novel or a film, but in the best cases I only discover what that is in trying to say it. Just as I read criticism to learn how someone else was changed, I write criticism to find out about myself, including about the limits of my cognitive and affective resources. What seduces me? What am I afraid of? Why do I find myself drawn to this object? ... Any emphatic experience surpasses the ordinary capacities of the I, revealing it as exposed to dimensions beyond itself.

To say that the subject of an encounter with art (or with some other significant formation) is exposed tells us that this subject is not merely engaged in the sort of self-limitation, self-effacement, or self-bracketing recommended by various forms of reading. Exposure differs too from the suspicion—of self and of other—that suffuses virtually all contemporary criticism. For exposure names that way of being in which I put myself into a position such that I can be affected in ways I cannot fathom. (Chaouli 333)

Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory [or “hermeneutics of suspicion,” “symptomatic reading,” etc.], both because they are about pleasure (“merely aesthetic”) and because they are

frankly ameliorative (“merely reformist”). What makes pleasure and amelioration so “mere”? (Sedgwick 144)

All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed. What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. ... The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. ... In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. (Sontag 13-14)

* * *

Yes, perhaps in a way what we need today is a kind of “erotics of reading” (as Richard Howard describes Barthes *Pleasure*⁴), of art writing⁵—a sensual, phenomenological “erotics” of encounter and response, exposure and submission to, dialogue and intercourse *with* the work more than the mastering, pseudo-scientifically “objective” or

⁴ The final phrase of his “A Note on the Text” of Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*.

⁵ I will be using “art,” “art writing,” and “art criticism” to cover the full range of art practices generally included in the so-called “fine arts,” from literature to dance to video art.

impersonal hermeneutics of it that criticism has evolved or devolved into and which only widens the artist/art/critic split of which Giorgio Agamben writes, and of which split it must be noted that criticism itself is a function. Given this state of affairs, it must be asked whether criticism should (or even could) undergo a fundamental transformation to help effect even a partial reparation of this split or a way of inhabiting it differently and more productively than I believe it does today. I find my own critical impulses inadequate to respond to or re-present the work. I find myself, as a critic, either abandoning or betraying the object, absorbing it into philosophy or merely using it to illustrate my predetermined theoretical and/or political argument, at one end, or bypassing this as completely as possible (to what extent is it possible to avoid theoretical presuppositions?) by subsuming criticism fully into creative writing, foregoing “rigorous critical engagement” (according to established *academic-institutional* criteria) in favor of the aesthetic force of literary language to narrate, describe, represent—to transpose some of what struck me in an artwork into an ekphrastic literary artwork of my own. Is the latter a solution, or a mere avoidance of the problematic of art/criticism (or art/~~criticism~~)? If the latter, creative mode is legitimate, is it necessary? Is it the most legitimate, or even the only legitimate, mode? Or can it stand beside and in balance with other modes? Am I even asking the right questions?

To take a certain version of Roland Barthes as one model, as Michel Chaouli does in his article on “Criticism and Style,” and to stand with Susan Sontag “against

interpretation,” is to stand, to one extent or another (and given one definition or another), for a more “literary” mode and model, form and style—and writing process—of criticism. If we are to ask alongside Agamben how art can again or more fully participate in the *poietic* unfolding of a shared world, then we must ask how our responses to art works, what we have come to call “criticism,” can do the same. As far as “professional” criticism, it must be asked whether it is at all necessary or only a disfunction of the split of the aesthetic regime. Should all criticism be “lay” criticism? If our art writing is to attain to a status of the *poietic*, could there be any basis for a separation of professional from “lay” response? So too with artists, and the difference, I would venture, would cease to be, as it now is, one of type or kind and there would remain only that of degree. While some may be judged more skilled or eloquent than others, the use of our fundamental creative forces, our *poietic* capacities, in both art and criticism (words almost guaranteed to remain in use for a time, perhaps a very long time, although we might be better off without them) would be the domain not of the select few (knighted by such highly problematic and myopic institutions as academia, the museum and gallery system, literary publishers, etc.) and become—I am not so much sure it would be *again* as for the *first time*, a domain of activity for the many. Not too easily to fall for the slippage between the words themselves, but it is a legitimate prospect that must be explored, a question in need of asking, a hypothesis to be tested: Would a more *poietic* mode of criticism necessarily be more *poetic*, as well?

The idea of a more literary mode of philosophy and criticism has gone in and out of fashion over the past fifty or sixty years without, perhaps, ever fully coming to fruition in practice outside of a handful of maverick cases (and most of those can be found in philosophy rather than criticism). It remains highly suspect within the hardened walls of academe and between the pages of most academic and popular literary and art journals. I would like it to become the norm, or a norm among norms—plural rather than any straight-jacketing singular. For at stake is not just, or primarily, a question of which aspects of aesthetic experience and response we write about, but *how* we write about them.

I take up this question on the other edge of the explosion of Continental philosophy-fed critical theory and its often watered-down, cherry-picked absorption into the Anglo-American fields of arts and cultural criticism, the other side of theory's "camp" wars and the lament in university literature departments that literature had at one point all but been evacuated from literary studies in the American academy, the other side of this explosion that was only beginning to take hold as Sontag wrote her essay in 1964. Many of us remain dissatisfied with art and literary criticism but most of us stand limply by, hedging our bets, unwilling to risk our academic careers and reputations (or our hope of garnering one), edging forth but not coming to any creative solution to the problem,

even as contemporary theory prides itself on its exquisite self-consciousness, its relentless interrogation of fixed ideas, there is a sense in which the very adoption of such a stance is pre-conscious rather than freely made, ... determined in advance by the pressure of institutional demands, intellectual prestige, and the status-seeking protocols of professional advancement. (Felski 4)

For all the fuss, the forms and procedures available to criticism have not much expanded or changed, but remain those of the “well-oiled machine of ideology critique.” Coming of intellectual age in the early to mid-1990s, I was willingly and enthusiastically inculcated into the “symptomatic” mode of critical response that Best and Marcus attack in their co-edited special issue of *Representations*, adding their voices to Felski’s and Sedgwick’s, among others. I have found myself persistently marked, even marred by it, if no longer quite married to it (we’re trying out seeing other people). I do think it was a productive detour, and I still cringe at similar “anti-theory” statements that pop out of mouths (some of them even belonging to tenured professors) that seem to know very little of what they indict. But the result for me, personally, was that I stopped making art, which I found impotent to make any “real changes” in the world (so how the hell did I land on *theory*?), stopped writing and reading a single word of the poetry I had loved, and, in a short college year, had become a “Butlerhead”⁶ ideologue who knew exactly how he would “read” a text (in the “strong” and

⁶ As devotees of Judith Butler were called in the 1990’s, after the explosion of her reputation with the publication and rampant misreading of *Gender Trouble*.

imperialist sense of appropriating it, of pillaging it for every last trace of e.g., heteropatriarchy it possessed) in the “paranoid,” “symptomatic” manner before I ever opened my eyes to what was on the page, screen, or stage. Indeed, to again echo Felski, what virtue or purpose can there be in such “unmasking” or “reading” when we know our conclusions in advance? “True interpretation is what occurs *in* the encounter” (Chaouli 334).

I would affirm that feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race theories and cultural studies and multiculturalism more generally *have* made a change. We are now far more aware, on the whole, of the ways in which we represent, construct, *materialize* (in Judith Butler’s provocative sense⁷) ourselves and others—bodies and pleasures, perceptual habits and emotional responses—the way we constrict others with fictional norms and foundationless proclamations of the “natural,” etc. But upper-level and graduate humanities courses and the small, inbred pool of academic readers and writers among whom professional-institutional critical work anemically circulates (poets know this territory well) can realistically contribute only a little to the short-term, narrowly “political” changes they nobly champion as politically engaged and even “activist” scholars, theorists, and critics (so too with poets). The social and cultural philosophies and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s are primarily responsible for the immediate changes, but we do all play a part and contribute in some small way.

⁷ See especially the introduction and title chapter of her *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993).

It is good that we have contributed what we can qua critics; this work has some measure of effect and importance, too. But I am here echoing the many academics, only a few of whom I present above in my “cabinet” of epigraphs, who are registering a similar discomfort, a feeling that ideological and theoretical engagement has become more dictate and dogma than one possibility among other possibilities to be freely chosen or not (i.e., “determined in advance by the pressure of institutional demands”). It does seem that the only acceptable argument in an academic work now almost invariably entails a claim to the radically transformative, subversive or, on the flip side, regressive and repressive power of a work. This is an important aspect of any cultural production to attend to, and I continue to do so myself, but not only or even primarily to it. Cultural politics is only one dimension (and is it indeed always one of its dimensions) of art works, as well as of our responses to them as human beings living lives wrapped round in mystery and uncertainty. Enjoyment — “mere” enjoyment — should not be the taboo that Sedgwick recognized it to have become, nor should be personal stakes, engagements, involvements, responses — including emotional ones — responses that perhaps rely on personal history or contingent circumstances of reception, themselves a part of any art *work* (both noun and verb), and which can be written about “in such a way that the most private layers of experience come to reveal what is most public” (Chaouli 340). Much to the academic-institutional critic’s dismay or even horror, art sometimes lives in us in ways that enliven us and that engage the

most personal, and personally important, aspects of our lives. And yes, this is also important, at least as important, and may resonate with others and open alternate points of encounter with the work. As Felski writes, the

models of selfhood on hand in contemporary criticism suffer from an overly schematic imperative ... to recruit literature [the arts, generally] into the drama of asserting or subverting such categories. The making and unmaking of identity, however, while a theme much loved by contemporary critics, is not a rubric well-equipped to capture the sheer thickness of subjectivity or the mutability of aesthetic response. (11)

What many people are fighting for—sometimes with deadly weapons—all over the planet is the opportunity to live their lives how they think best. The question of what is entailed in a life, in “a good life,” the inaugural question of ethical and life philosophy, remains one of the most fundamental questions we must ask ourselves, and is sometimes lost, in academic writing, in the din of ideological shuffle and careerist scrambling, and is often dismissed as disengaged, apolitical, sentimental, and/or wanting for rigor. What will we do with our freedom in a just society when and if it is ever fully secured? What will we do in the interim, with our days off from the front? I find these questions just as important as issues of cultural and economic politics, which essentially fight to establish a secure space in which to contemplate them, to freely test a

few possible answers. This opposition between personal/apolitical/enjoyment and engaged/political/serious criticism which academics have constructed to distance these two fields of rich and complex involvement is false, and the resulting criticism diminishes both the works and work of art—its activity of activating us—and our engagements with it.

But lest I be misunderstood, I do want to reaffirm the importance and necessity of the “symptomatic” work that has been done, and of continuing, in some form, to do it. To the extent that any art follows the mimetic model whose dominance in the Western tradition Sontag laments in “Against Interpretation,” it is an important shift in perception and understanding that we have come to see the ways that we represent one another—and our failures to do so at all, in some cases—as having very real effects on our lives. Martin Duberman’s memoir *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey* is a remarkable illustration of the potential damage living in a world that now whispers with a wink, now shouts with fists flying, here and there and everywhere the painfully singular narrative whereby one’s sexuality is simultaneously proclaimed to be an essential part of one’s being and a degenerate, despicable sickness of mind and body to be overcome, if it can be at all, by psychiatric treatment. That bigoted model was Duberman’s only reality and he details its devastating effects on his psychological well-being and emotional and romantic life over the course of his memoir. Making more and more

readers aware of the psycho-cultural dynamics of representation is an important step in combatting such marginalizing forces as the heteronormativity that warped Duberman's understanding of himself and the life choices he thought possible for him as a gay man. As a gay man myself, I deeply appreciate and have been drawn to such work.

If art can be, not just "symptomatic" of such cultural configurations, but re-scriptive of them, writing and rewriting them differently, then art becomes in part a tool for social change and one of criticism's functions can become clarifying—making visible—the ways in which repressive power structures and diminished subjective formations and deformations are being perpetuated or resisted and rejected by a work. It is the fact that "legitimate" criticism and the most lauded art have been reduced to this sole function that is beginning to exhaust and constrict some of us. The "politics of representation" has become, itself, a homogenizing model. In criticism, too much of it came to treat the arts as mere symptoms of a morally suspect culture, and too much of it imposes these ambitions on art works, conscripting them into a battle they may not be fighting, writing criticism of work that is less open to it and that does not so much emerge from it as stuffs it in a bag and steals away with it.

After years of my own training and practice of "symptomatic" criticism, I find it difficult to approach "art criticism" (which I define as the emotionally, intellectually, and perceptually careful, nuanced response to various aspects of specific works of art)

without feeling as though I am unethically using and abusing them to forward my own theoretical and political purposes. I find it difficult to approach works of art without appropriating them with the lexicon of this theory or that, using them as mere illustrations of this or that politico-aesthetic or philosophical argument, which is no more evil in itself than it is the work of criticism proper. I have come to believe that this difficulty issues more fundamentally from that split which Agamben discusses, and the issue of philosophy's appropriation of art works generally is just as operative here, and literary and art criticism's obsessions with identity politics is really only one aspect of the problem, which may indeed be fundamental to modernity and have no solution (other, perhaps, than the vagaries of time). And so to spare the art entirely of all this violence, I find myself running back into the arms of pure theory, of philosophy, of the dialogue and debates of ideas with ideas with no reference to art—never to articulate another aesthetic experience of art works of any kind again. I find myself thinking that the philosopher-critic, rather, should be banned from the Republic (the ethicists and metaphysicians can stay), and art set free to work its magic on us (however naively romantic that may sound to the academic philosopher-critic).

While I reaffirm the social value of diversifying representational practices, and want to err on the side of hopeful idealism when it comes to contributing whatever small share of political efficacy any art work—let alone any work of art criticism—might contribute to the general cause of progressive political change, I am exasperated

by the academic imperative that reduces art to nothing more, that demands it be nothing less and nothing else than the most radical reconfiguration of power relations, dominant fictions, and hegemonic matrices of intelligibility, and that demands this singular focus of criticism, too.

So, then, what “should” criticism do, if not shut up entirely? Good question. I am not entirely sure I have an answer. But following Felski’s lead, I want to say that everything positive about the now claustrophobically hegemonic and monocular mode of critical response variously called symptomatic reading and ideology critique, among other epithets, can be retained even while we open wide the way for other modes of response, other subject matter and concerns, other forms and processes for writing in response to art. It can only be a richer, more valuable, and diverse discourse.

In all of this it presses upon me to ask (some will say naively), Whatever happened to the value of enjoyment? As Sedgwick points out, it is dismissed as “merely aesthetic” the weak (read *feminine*, read *effete*, read *queer*), apolitical, formalist response. So I will embrace that queer-feminine position of the effete aesthete, asserting with a flourish of the fingers that the aesthetic, harkening back to its roots in *aesthesis*, is the fundamental category of any materialist criticism—art, cultural, or political in the narrowest sense—as aesthetics does not just designate the aspect of art works and the natural world that pertains to the beautiful or even sublime design, “merely” the “purely” formal aspect of it (as if such a thing could be isolated). Aesthetics rather

designates the form as the sensual-material mattering forth of the dynamic energetics that constitute the phenomenological “object” as presented at a particular moment to the particularities and contingencies of a given “subject’s” sensations and perceptual experience. This aesthetic form is precisely that through which any content can be accessed and ascertained. The entire oeuvre of Jacques Rancière aids in this regard. He claims that art’s politically radical potential lies not in its content but its form (and asserts, as does Sontag, that the two cannot be analytically cut apart) and its “dissensual” aesthetic formation of “our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects open up new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation” that shape “a new body and a new sensorium for oneself” (*Emancipated Spectator* 82; 71). This begins to articulate one way of approaching art that entails more than identity politics while expanding our senses of the political, the aesthetic, and the relation between these terms. Rancière defines “dissensus” as “an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification” (*Emancipated Spectator* 48-9). Art works activate or condition an encounter with sensual-material configurations or rhythms, choreographies or orchestrations of images, sounds, signifiers, objects, textures, tones, atmospheres, silences. In these configurations one can find oneself, can more fully articulate the

contours of that self beyond the already-known or redraw them anew, in interaction with the materiality of the work, its structured and structuring forces which are the trace of the artistic process, the process of the de-figuring and reconfiguring subjectivization of the artist, something of which is carried across in the rhythms, structures, formations-mattering-forth-in-us of the work.

So I want to revisit this notion of an erotics of the aesthetic experience, the aesthetic encounter, and the ethics that relation requires. I want to think about the art work as the occasion for an aesthetic (sensual-sensory) experience, as an engagement with the auditor's perceptions, emotions, and conceptions that can clarify, renew, and even transform them, expanding the potential for new formations of subjectivity — and at its most fundamental, for any kind of "subjectivity" at all and in all its richness beyond current identity categories.

Do we then begin with the aesthetic subject or the aesthetic work? Both. For where the art "work" ends and the auditor begins is never entirely clear, given the nature of reception. The event of the aesthetic encounter, the "work" that art carries out, along with the *poietic* and poetic (or "artistic," more generally) force that it carries across to its auditors, entails contingencies that could not be anticipated by the artist and that exceed those of its most immediate material boundaries. But the boundaries of art's "work," of the event that constitutes any person's encounter with it, are not coextensive

with the binding of a book's pages or the frame of a painting (such internal otherness of the work is incorporated into the very mode of such contemporary forms as immersive, interactive, relational, and participatory art). It pertains to the stranger within me, you, any of us, that Chaouli references as being in us more than us—both the artist's and the auditor's. It is worth quoting him at length.

In truth, I am a stranger to myself, and an account of my encounter with a significant phenomenon earns a right to make a claim on others when it testifies to the ways that I somehow find my own resources outstripped by that encounter and thus find myself exposed. What is more, the place where I am a stranger to myself coincides with the place that my experience ceases to be mine alone and can become public. ... [W]ithout this exposure my experience fails to open to others. For it is precisely by exposing myself to an experience I potentially fail to master that an intensive experience of art radiates beyond the confines of my self [sic] to make demands on the attention of others. (339; 333-4)

It is only in willfully failing to "master" the work, I would add, that the critic can transmit something of her "intensive experience" of the work rather than merely her transmogrification of it into an illustration of her own ideas about Art/~~art~~. Even if Agamben is right that this is inevitable to some extent, it is not inevitable that it be the only or dominate mode of criticism. The difference might be thought on the analogy of that between translation of a poem from one language into another and a "summary" of

its “content” and effects. The fundamental problem is that for most criticism, and especially academic criticism, whose *accepted* stylistic choices narrow to a tightrope-thin walk, “mastering” the work with its self-founded critical “authority” is precisely its ambition. Criticism’s only “kinship with what it critiques,” as it is currently practiced, is mainly that it is made of other signifying elements and not, to use Chaouli’s phrase to indicate as best one can the most essential goal of criticism’s responses, to establish a kinship insofar as “they unfold their force in the same manner” as the art works to which they are responding (340). The dominant methods and style (is there more than one?) of criticism today form even less of a kinship with music or some visual art works, such as a Richard Serra sculpture or the installations of the Light and Space movement, which do not entail signifying elements, only those that shape matter and energy in space and transform that space in the process, than they establish with their most probable or closest kin, literature. I would argue that most criticism does indeed share only words; it does not share a similar force that similarly unfolds.

While criticism must by necessity unfurl whatever it can of the work’s force in *its own* mode and style of unfurling—unless the only “critical response” to sculpture should be via other sculpture (a proposition I would not dismiss outright)—this unfurling should be imprinted by, its style and mode shaped and directed by, that of the work—the work, activity, or force of the work-object, that is, of the aesthetic encounter, a part of which is the spectator-critic’s own singularity and singularly

contingent experience(s) of the very force of the work. There are some fine examples of this, I believe, though they stand, even when celebrated, as eccentrics kept within reach only at arm's-length by mainstream academic criticism (and graduate students everywhere are warned not to follow their model, which would be career suicide). Poet Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* is one such example. Fiction writer and philosopher William H. Gass's book *Reading Rilke*, on Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, a mix of biography, translation theory, and translations and readings of the poems all in his seductively lyrical prose, presents another unique and uniquely enjoyable encounter of one artist with another, the force of both their styles unfolding forth from its pages. In Gass's there is something of his own innervating interaction with the poems that would have almost any reader running to find them if they were not published there in full as part of the book. Jeanette Winterson's *Art Objects*. Barthes's famous discussion of the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*, and his description of the various ways the *punctum* of particular photographs strikes him, may be as perfect a distillation of what Chaouli describes as one can yet find.

He offers the model of such an unfolding of forces in kinship with the work, however, only to immediately qualify that his readers "may come away from these pages thinking that I have recommended a first-person, personal, poetic, and emotive account to counterbalance the third-person, impersonal, prosaic, and rational view, but they would only be half right" (Chaouli 338). His assertion is that the distinction

between content/argument and form/style survives even the most rabid attempts to erase it, that it “obtains not merely for writing oriented towards communicating ideas; it appears to be a dimension of all writing, perhaps of all representational practice” (337). As not all art is “representational,” I will reassert here Chaouli’s reassertion of the distinction of form from content in all art works, but want to further qualify it using precisely those works which are not representational to clarify my conception of it as entailing a certain indistinction as well. In Olafur Eliasson’s light installations, for instance, which I discuss below in “The Sensation of *Time*,” Eliasson’s light works do not, for the most part, produce an image, as in the “light works” that are photographs, films, and videos, but are pure light effects that work directly on our senses. Such a work cannot, I would assert be said to possess an “argument” (Chaouli’s more restrictive category), but could be said to have a “content” insofar as it affects us. What the work activates in us—be it intellectual, affective, or sensory—is its “content,” or what I will call its “content-effect” for the doubling the addition provides (in which we can hear content as both agent and product of the effect). The content-effect can only activate the auditor through its *form-material* (in which we should hear *formative* and *forming*), through the materialization of its form in the experience of a person (the potentially subject-forming or –transforming experience, if we distinguish between “persons” and “subjects”⁸), however. In this way, “form-material” and “content-effect”

⁸ Along the lines of Lacano-Badouian philosophies of the subject, for instance, where the logical moments of the

are extensions each of the other, each shaping and producing the other, as Black Mountain poetics long ago informed us. They are analogous to the “two” sides of the one-sided Möbius strip that “flips” from one side to the other at a point that cannot be definitively determined. Like this single surface that gives the effect of two sides, the distinction and indistinction of a form-material and the content-effect which gives rise to it are logical but not chronological moments of the aesthetic experience; they are ontologically indistinct portions of a continuous surface that is nonetheless perceived or experienced as distinct.

The unfurling of the force of the work through and as “criticism,” when it functions to whatever extent in such a mode, must do so with the proper attention to and engagement with the unfolding of the form-material’s materializing of the content-effect of its form. This can be described and analyzed, to be sure, and should be, as well as placed in (art or broadly cultural or political) historical context, and so forth. All of these functions of criticism can be valuable and can even inhabit the same critical work. But criticism in its mode and moment of greatest wakefulness to the work, collusion and collaboration with the work, in its greatest degree of responsiveness to the work in what I will therefore call its mode of “responsive criticism” or “responsive art writing,” must engage its own form-material, its own style, in an attempt to carry over to a reader

precipitation of the subject in Jacques Lacan’s thought, or the Lacanian-informed “truth procedure” of the subject, in Alain Badiou’s work, is never given or guaranteed, but only obtained in a certain movement of restructuring or transformation of the conscious and unconscious structures of the human animal.

whatever of the work can be transmitted through any mere secondhand (and therefore, of course, necessarily insufficient) account of that emphatic experience of the work, that force and effect of its content-effect-forming form-material. As I have just said, there are other legitimate and useful aims to other critical modes that can stand beside responsive criticism, that can be incorporated into the same essay with it. But the responsive mode is perhaps the only necessary mode, if there is any *necessary* mode of criticism (if art-making in one form or another might be said to be inevitable, if not necessary, for the human being—the essentially *poietic* being—then responsive criticism is the only inevitable form), and it is the most valuable, attaining, where and insofar as it operates in the responsive mode, an aesthetic status itself. What we need now is an *erotics* more than (but perhaps alongside) a hermeneutics of art writing, which is to say, we do not need a pseudo-science but rather an *art* of criticism, and therefore a “literary-responsive” criticism, as it would most precisely be termed, indicating not its object but its essential mode. To succeed in its goal of carrying over something of the force of the individual aesthetic experience, any literary-responsive art writing must be, itself, art; it must be essentially *literary*.

This goal cannot entail, of course, any Romantic-Idealist notions of an *adequate* response, one attaining an essential adequation to the art work itself as itself, to the in-itself, for-itself of the art work, which does not truly exist as such. I reassert the now long-held and ubiquitous view that art works exist in interaction and interactivation

with their human auditors, without whom art works, properly speaking, do not exist. Without this interactivation, the art works, despite bearing the trace of their original and originating interactivation with the artist or artists who made them, would be rendered as inert as any rock. The inverse scenario proves the point as well, where this poor rock is transposed into the aesthetic by our experience of it as “beautiful” or “sublime” or, if encountered in a gallery or museum (perhaps alongside a copy of Duchamp’s *Fountain*), even “art.”

[T]he objects we attend to also exceed the boundaries of what we expect an ordinary object of study to be, for under certain conditions, conditions we cannot enumerate ahead of time, *anything* can come to be artistically meaningful. For what interests us is not the object “as in itself it really is,” but the object as its force registers in a human being with his or her own history and style. (Chaouli 332)

I am thinking that maybe an unholy ménage of the rigors of “objective,” New Critical-style close reading that keenly regards the sensual, formal elements of the work; impressionist, descriptive, narrative, lyrical, and poetic literary-responsive criticism that attends to the effects that this work has on this auditor in this place at this point in time; and the genealogical strain of New Historicism that sees the self and the work in larger context may be the recipe for a criticism that might speak to and with but never *for* the work. All three of these aspects need not operate together in any given essay or

in any single critic's work, but ideally in the entire body of criticism on a work. In its literary-responsive mode, however, criticism would have to attend to enjoyment, *jouissance*, the *punctum*, the pleasure-pains of the sensory encounter of the work, the critic to her own temporally and spatially positioned, contingent and serendipitously occasioned bodily encounter with it, and would speak to how the work lives in and enlivens the critic-spectator (and so could potentially work similarly on others). An *erotics* of art writing. In this way the phenomenological, contingently situated, idiosyncratic literary-responsive mode of criticism constitutes an "erotics" of reading and writing, with all of the muddled material-sensual, em-bodied and ek-static intercourse with the work this connotes. If we are to have an *erotics* of writing, then we must also outline the contours of an *ethics* of *eros*, of our singular aesthetic experience in this art encounter that may open the door for others to have a richer, more *poietically* productive experience of the work.

CHAPTER 3

FACE TO FACE WITH AN OTHER (ART): THE CRISIS OF ENCOUNTER AND THE QUESTION OF (RESPONSIVE) CRITICISM

Where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved, and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a possible circuit of relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined, they are held apart, the third component plays a paradoxical role, for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the presence whose absence is demanded by eros. (Anne Carson, qtd in Stewart *Poetry* 336n16)

Art, all art, as insight, as rapture, as transformation, as joy. ... I really believe that human beings can be taught to love what they do not love already and that the privileged moment exists for all of us, if we let it. Letting art is the paradox of active surrender. I have to work for art if I want it to work on me. (Winterson 6)

[As a child], faking sleep after a story was the only way to have private time, an afterlude of silence so the story could bloom inside you, and not get ruined by

explanations and claims and arguments. When you stayed asleep, the subject could not change and the story could not be defeated by the trivia of aftermath that seeks to noise up the room.

What did you think?

What was it about?

How do you feel?

These are not bad questions. Some people get paid to ask or answer them. They reveal us yearning to be interesting in the fashion of our interesting stories, trying to live up to the energy we have just greedily devoured. We might be at our best when we pursue such questions, thinking out loud in the electrified periphery a story creates. But I wanted instead, during those times, to keep my eyes closed and hear nothing more. The story was sufficient and it would echo on after it finished. I was suspicious of discussion because I suspected magic was at work, the kind that asked for silence. The best stories were stun guns that held my attention completely, leaving me paralyzed on the outside, but very nearly spasming within. (Marcus ix-x)

Energy arcs over that gap [between word and image], and it's practically audible. And it requires an adaptation if not of our senses, at least of our perceptual capacity. In this way, it's the art that's working on us. (Swensen 126-7)

Looking with “pictorial intelligence” entails an inevitable revision, based on that work’s particularities, of our conception of how we look and of what matters in art

The interactive principle underlying such an approach feeds into the constantly-changing methodology of art-writing. It also undermines any possible attempt to reduce the analysis to a formalistic, descriptive mode. Based on the relational quality of the work, it is by necessity also a principle of openness toward the social as well as the emotional, cognitive, and affective processes that we call, for lack of a better word, aesthetic. But this word can only be used if it is understood, as it was always meant to be, in terms of precisely that process that involves body and mind, viewer and work, in an inextricable mixture. (Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider* xii – xiv)

Criticism is not a record of an experience that lies in the past and whose features await documentation; it is, rather, the arena for developing the experience. I may know that I have something to say about a novel or a film, but in the best cases I only discover what that is in trying to say it. Just as I read criticism to learn how someone else was changed, I write criticism to find out about myself, including about the limits of my cognitive and affective resources. What seduces me? What

am I afraid of? Why do I find myself drawn to this object? ... Any emphatic experience surpasses the ordinary capacities of the I, revealing it as exposed to dimensions beyond itself. (Chaouli 333)

The human sensibility, via language, moves to its object of scrutiny and gives way to it, letting it stain the language. The imagination goes out as far as it can into the thing and comes back imprinted. One of the great mysteries in poetry centers on the way in which the crisp and honest description of the outer world schools one for the encounter with one's inner reality. ... To place oneself at genuine risk, that the salvation effected be genuine (i.e., of use to us), the poet must move to encounter an other, not more versions of the self. An other: God, nature, a beloved, an Idea, Abstract form, Language itself as a field, Chance, Death, consciousness, what exists in the silence. Something not invented by the writer. Something the writer risks being defeated—or silenced—by. All matters of style, form, and technique refer to that end. (Jorie Graham xxvii)

Interiority makes itself visible. In my imaginary still life, the “context and commentary” of my experience would be gone, but something would remain, something distilled and vibrant in the quality of attention itself. Is that what soul

or spirit is, then, the outward-flying attention, the gaze that binds us to the world? (Mark Doty 49-50)

The task of aesthetic production and reception in general is to make visible, tangible, and audible the figures of persons. ... Poetic making is an anthropomorphic project; the poet undertakes the task of recognition in time — the unending tragic Orphic task of drawing the figure of the other — the figure of the beloved who can reciprocally recognize one's own figure — out of the darkness. To make something where and when before there was nothing. (Stewart, *Poetry* 2)

The “grain” is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. If I perceive this “grain” in a piece of music and accord this “grain” a theoretical value ... , I inevitably set up a new scheme of evaluation which will certainly be individual — I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic — but in no way “subjective” (it is not the psychological “subject” [*ego* might have been more precise] in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce — to express — that subject but, on the contrary, lose it). (Barthes, *Image — Music — Text* 188)

Poetry can only be critiqued by poetry. A judgment of art that is not itself an artwork ... has no citizenship rights in the realm of art. (Friedrich Schlegel, Critical Fragment 117, qtd in Chaouli, epigraph)

When the poets enter the forest of language it is with the express purpose of getting lost; far gone in bewilderment, they seek crossroads of meaning, unexpected echoes, strange encounters; they fear neither detours, surprises, nor darkness. But the huntsman who ventures into this forest in the hot pursuit of the "truth," who sticks to a single continuous path, from which he cannot deviate for a moment on pain of losing the scent or imperiling the progress he has already made, runs the risk of capturing nothing but his shadow. (Paul Valéry, qtd in Waldrop 173)

* * *

I want to explore the contours of this literary-responsive writing. I want to assume that if Chaouli's supposed reader is only half-right in thinking that he is advocating for a poetic style, for Schlegel's proposition that the literary-responsive criticism is the most legitimate and only necessary and inevitable form of response (to transpose it into my

own terms, and even as others are welcomed to accompany it), then Chaouli himself is at least half wrong. Literary-responsive criticism, a criticism that attains or approaches the status of “art” itself is then by definition an *ekphrastic* mode of writing. Ekphrasis is the creative, written response to other works of art, traditionally taking the form of a poem that is written about a painting or sculpture (a conception which imposes too many limits from the beginning). Given the problematically antagonistic, or “paragonal,” relation of poet to art work in the traditional conceptualization of ekphrasis that James Heffernan analyzes and reaffirms, we must think through the relationship between ekphrasis and *ethics*.

James Heffernan defines ekphrasis in economically aphoristic terms as the “verbal representation of visual representation” (3). While that sounds innocuous enough, ekphrastic writing traditionally has been conceived as a confrontation between poet and art work, and Heffernan reproduces this model without hesitation. “In my judgment,” he tells us upfront, on the very first page, “the most promising line of inquiry in the field of sister arts studies is the one drawn by W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Iconology*, which treats the relation between literature and the visual arts as essentially paragonal, a struggle for dominance between the image and the word” (1). I want to explore newer, non-confrontational, non-appropriative models of the ekphrastic, ethical, and ekphrastic-cum-erotic encounter with art works and the literary-responsive mode of criticism.

Ekphrastic poetry according to Heffernan seeks to master and colonize the visual art work, claiming possession of its true meaning, which can only be realized in words. I would argue that this is rather the traditional stance the critical subject takes towards the work it frames as its “object.” In shifting the framework of ekphrastic poetry, then, I also intend to shift in the very same way the work of literary-responsive criticism, which is in essence the same thing.

The ekphrastic poem in Heffernan’s traditional model is construed to be both the holder of the key to the mute painting, sculpture, shield of Achilles or Grecian urn, and, thereby, to be superior to the art work to which it responds. As Heffernan acknowledges, this model of the writer who seeks to penetrate into the dark inner depths of the art work’s secret in order to master it and claim its treasure as its own is—as his similar rhetoric makes hammerhead clear—disturbingly gendered. For instance, he offers as one of several causes of his fascination with the subject the fact that it is often “the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space” (1). Again, Heffernan does not refute this model, but reproduces it by characterizing ekphrasis as struggle, in one instance, and as appropriation, or *prosopopeia*, the “rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object,” in the other (6). “Ekphrasis,” he continues, “speaks not only *about* works of art, but also *to* and *for* them” (7). The prepositions that

mark what Heffernan takes to be the central relation between the art work and writer in ekphrasis, “to” and “for,” are particularly telling, as is the preposition not chosen. It is therefore tempting to replace, as a point of clarification, his “speaking to” with “speaking *at*” and, as remediation, his “speaking for” with “speaking with”—and “listening to.” This is why his epigrammatic definition of ekphrasis as a “verbal representation of visual representation,” though pithy, is inadequate. It bespeaks the inadequacy of the representational model of ekphrasis itself, where standing *in for* is not standing in the proverbial *shoes of*, and does not stand *in relation to* the work, in a relation, that is, of empathetic openness to the terms of the other. To employ Chaouli’s word choice, the ekphrastic poet-critic who does not *expose* herself to the work, to the paradox of active surrender (in Winterson’s terms), who fails to submit herself to its grain and textures, thereby fails the entire enterprise of responding to the work, the entire enterprise of “criticism.” Instead, on Heffernan’s model, which is indeed the traditional ekphrastic and academic-critical model of response, representation is neither product nor cause of either identification or empathy, but rather of annexation and dominance. Ekphrastic criticism, if it conceives of itself as representational in the paragonal and symbolically violent sense of *speaking for*, is doomed to reproduce the model of (gendered) mastery and antagonism.

In her essay on Barbara Guest’s ekphrastic poetry, Sara Lundquist denies that there is any necessity to the centrality of such a paragonal model.

Guest does not seem to posit the relationship of poem to painting as one of conflict and competition, but as one of division of labor and dialogue, one of both reverence and resistance, in which she, as viewer and maker of meaning, is equal to the painter as maker of meaning. To the claim of theorists that ekphrastic poetry speaks about, to, and for paintings, Guest's poems add an alternative: they speak *with the paintings* and, through them, *with the painters*; they speak *relationally* rather than paragonally. (283-4, my emphases)

Also attending to the importance of the relational in her essay "To Writewithize," Cole Swensen discusses new modes of ekphrastic writing in contemporary poetry, new relations between visual and verbal arts, which "don't *look at* art so much as *live with* it. The principle difference here is not in the verb, but in the preposition. There's a side-by-side, a walk-along-with, at their basis" (123). There are, in fact, other ways of conceptualizing and practicing ekphrastic writing apart from conflict. Lundquist and Swensen, looking primarily at examples of women's ekphrastic praxes, pose an alternative model to Heffernan's, a *relational* model which I would like to take up here and further explore.

Which aim brings me to the "passional ethics" of any erotic-amorous encounter (including that of the art lover), to that "emphatic experience" Chaouli references, to the relation of one subject to another, and to that most fundamental creative act: the precipitation of subjectivity in the *poietic* unfolding of a lived body-world. Originally

given as a series of lectures on the “ethics of the passions” at Erasmus University in Rotterdam in 1982, the essays Luce Irigaray later published under the title *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* continue her work of critiquing the narcissistic and appropriative (what she has termed “specularizing”) structure of masculine subjectivity. “Historically, the female has been used in the constitution of man’s love of self” (62). On Irigaray’s account, men use and use up women as a resource and support of their own subjective positions without reciprocation, so that the women are given only such male-produced fantasies as the mother-wife and lover-whore as possible subject positions—possible lives. Women, then, are rendered paper doll fantasies with no real part to play in and for themselves, no female or feminine identity apart from the constructions of a patriarchal, homosocial culture.⁹ We see in this dynamic Heffernan’s gendered, paragonal model of ekphrasis. Irigaray works to overcome such appropriation and domination, and so will I.

In *Ethics* Irigaray engages philosophy not only in a critical but in an affirmative mode of philosophy as poetry and myth-making, developing the tropes of an independent and non-specularized feminine imaginary and envisioning the terms in which an ethical relation between lovers might be possible, a relation without the domination and co-optation by one of the subjectivity of the other. “Both [man and

⁹ Irigaray’s own foundational heterosexism will have to be interrogated and diffused elsewhere. For the purposes of this paper, I am assuming that sexual difference is structural and not biological, so that either a “masculine-structured subject” or “feminine-structured subject, to use Jacques Lacan’s less essentializing terms, can be biologically male, female or intersexed. There are numerous important questions surrounding this issue which I will have to defer for later.

woman] would have the capacity to perceive and conceive. *To suffer and to be active*. To suffer the self and to understand the self. To receive the self and to envelope the self. Becoming more open because of the freedom of each, male and female" (93). They would be more open to the self-forming and transforming exposure to that which is beyond oneself, the stranger within of which Chaouli writes, without attending to the problematic of the conventionally gendered conception of such an encounter. In doing precisely that, Irigaray tries to imagine an erotic encounter and broader relation between the sexes that would be mutually beneficial, where the masculine would not narcissistically wholly appropriate the feminine for its own use, would not revivify itself with the body of the feminine partner at her expense, relegating their relation to a strict subject-object duality rather than constituting or approaching a subject-subject relation that one might call ethical. A relation that is not, in Heffernan's word, paragonal. Irigaray imagines a relation that opens a space for each to enter so as to lose oneself, to be obliterated in the *jouissance* of the erotic encounter (that "little death"), and to return from it renewed.

"Soul-forging," Jorie Graham calls it; "drawing the other ... out of the darkness," writes Susan Stewart. Both poets refer not only or even primarily to the erotic encounter here, but to that encounter they both designate to constitute the fundamental poetic (and *poietic*) act of creation, the encounter with the other that conditions and comprises the *poietic* act of disclosing, in the activity of the literary mind, the contours of the other

(world, person, etc.). In the amorous dimension, the sexual act would entail the creation of subjectivity—the actualization of potential desires, pleasures, and bodies, the opening to new relations, perceptions and affects—beyond and apart from the human- and commodity-reproductive imperative of culture that reduces human capacities to the alienated role of labor-producer.

Essential to this project is what Irigaray designates as the interval *between* the two partners in the encounter, the interval as the space of attraction that both separates and links, both satiates and maintains desire, the space that, as distance, paradoxically makes intimacy possible, and that provides a neutral ground where each can cede their autonomy to the other, if but for a short, pregnant moment. “Overcoming the interval is the aim of desire,” Irigaray claims, and “the problem of desire is to suppress the interval without suppressing the other” (48), in which unfortunate case

the one and the other destroy the place of the other, believing in this way to have the whole; but they possess or construct only an illusory whole and destroy the meeting and the interval (of attraction) between the two. The world is destroyed in its essential symbol: the copula of the sex act. It is opened up to the abyss and not to welcome generation, the search for creation (54).

The ideal goal is for the interval to be redoubled, providing for both partners what Irigaray calls, in her brilliantly creative reading of Aristotle’s *Physics*, “place”: the space of subjectivation, that which delimits and defines an identity. “Between one and the

other," she writes, "there should be a mutual enveloping in movement [across the interval, each towards the other]" (54).

Such an encounter of "mutual enveloping" might serve as a model for ekphrasis. Irigaray's work on the ethics of the passions offers us in detail something of the relational model Lundquist claims for Guest and that Swensen describes as verbal and visual art "living with" one another, "side-by-side." The ekphrastic writer's process can be open to the art work as an other, as that which is moving through the writer but is beyond him or her and as that which cannot be held as a possession, but only approached, the interval traversed but not suppressed. The writer's ekphrastic process can open to the other of the art work as it does to her own writing in general, precisely in that mode of "active surrender" or listening that is so central a component of any art-compositional process. Ekphrasis, and more specifically, "literary-responsive" art writing, I want to propose, is an exploratory process, one of investigation and discovery, of collaboration and co-elaboration alongside and with the art work of a thinking that happens in the interval between the respondent and the work, a thinking which neither can be said to solely originate or authorize. Like the erotic encounter, it can create a space of mutual recognition and fecundity. The poet reaches out to the art work and submits herself to it, mirrors the work's openness, as all art works of merit are

open to their receiver, thereby producing various experiences, responses, thoughts, and interpretations.¹⁰

Writing can be more about discovering the other as well as the self *through the other* when such an encounter is fostered and mere “self-expression” of the ego-level personality is subordinated to that encounter with what is outside oneself (including, at least for the writer herself, the language on the page). At the limit, and insofar as all writing is intertextual, this might apply as the very principle and measure of “successful” ekphrastic writing (poetry, fiction, lyric essay, or literary-responsive criticism, the predominant mode of which might well be the “lyric essay”), separating the “good” from the “bad,” the adequate from the inadequate. Jorie Graham writes that “[a]ll matters of style, form, and technique refer to that end” of encountering the other (xxvii). Clichéd and insufficient work results, then, from the use of the empty form of another writer’s encounter or of a non-encounter, and marks the lack of an open and responsive relation. It merely mirrors the already familiar and comfortable back to us instead of opening up possibilities of discovery and new formations of sense and senses, affect and relationality. The subject-precipitating fecundity of such an encounter is what yields the “truth” of art, the “faithfulness” that traditional criticism once ascribed to it (if very differently conceived).

¹⁰ I do not mean here to confuse “openness to receiver” with “literary accessibility,” nor do I define “difficult” poetry as “closed off”; if anything, it is rather those “accessible” poems which do not bear repeated reading, spoon-feeding the reader their meaning or polemic, that make no “place” at all, in Irigaray’s sense of interval, for the reader, rendered passive and inert.

Ekphrasis, though traditionally a mode of writing, at its limit, can perhaps be extended to all those creative processes which begin on the “outside” of the writer or artist, and which seek to respond, converse, and interact. Ekphrasis could describe this responsiveness and relationality between any two art forms. The most apropos metaphor for such a relation, in that case, may be that of the *collaboration* (rather than confrontation) of two creative processes working in tandem to produce a discourse, a network of meanings, or meaning- and experience-producing works. The practice of installation artist Ann Hamilton provides a model response, a model for the process of openness and receptivity which I see as proper to ekphrastic, literary-responsive relationality, to the subjectivating ethical encounter. Rather than “site-specific,” Hamilton prefers the term “site-responsive” (Hamilton). She visits a space and feels its climate, takes in its light and architecture, opens up all of her senses and imagination to it. She also researches the history of the building and its location, responding to this specificity and incorporating it into the installation in various ways. Her mode of production, of *poiesis* — “material poetic making,” she calls it — is a mode of listening, seeing, receptivity (Hamilton). Perhaps a better image still, however, is to be found in her series of photographic portraits, titled *Face to Face*.

I have made a set of pinhole cameras that fit in my mouth. So the act of speaking is like the act of letting light enter my mouth, just as I let it enter the building in a new way. As I open my mouth, I'm exposing film. The photographs are made

standing face to face with another person. It records the trace of that one-minute or twenty seconds—which can seem very long—of standing face to face with another person. (Coffey 18-19)

This experience makes each participant very vulnerable and open to the other, and requires neither to speak. The mouth, the site of speech, of proclamation and proposition, is filled with the camera and becomes a purely receptive organ, imprinted with the trace of the other. It is with precisely such a seeing mouth that a writer or artist, indeed an ethical subject, must approach an art work, a collaborator, the world. In this way, ekphrasis becomes not the fundamental literary principle, but the model of the ethical as the fundamental *poietic*, that is, world-making, principle, and the phallus-gaze finally becomes receptive.

Human history is marred by domination. If there is any hope of changing that, then certainly we must change our models for human relations. Our poetics of the ethical must no longer be paragonal. It is my founding assumption in this exploration that the terms of *poiesis* and *praxis* are interwoven, that our behaviors in the world and the metaphorical and conceptual frameworks with which we conceive, “construct,” *materialize* our world into being are two sides of the same Möbius coin, flipping *ad infinitum* into the single, blurry sphere on which we live out our dizzy days. “The transition to a new age,” writes Irigaray, “assumes and entails an evolution or a transformation of forms, of the relations of *matter* and *form* and of the interval *between* (7).”

In an “erotics” of the sensual-material encounter, in an “ethical” and responsive literary-critical engagement with an art work, with the unfurling of the force of that encounter which is, in some way, an encounter with the trace of the artist’s own “material poetic making,” the subject-forming and/or transforming aesthetic experience does not just display its “mastery” of the art form for the mere sake of our appreciation and amazement. It instigates wonder, initiates the affective-reflective processes we term “thought,” “response,” the experience we call “being moved” or “inspired.” In what Chaouli calls the “emphatic” aesthetic experience, one that entails a substantive engagement with and enchantment by the work, one that “strikes us” (like a match), one that brings us into closer proximity with that stranger within ourselves who is more than our mere (ego) self. That stranger who shares secrets with others or secretly shares histories, languages—whole worlds that might seem foreign to us at first—chasing away the uncomfortably (the too comfortably, imperceptibly) familiar.

CHAPTER 4

THE SENSATION OF *TIME*: OLAFUR ELIASSON'S CRITICAL ENCHANTMENT

In way, it is with man as with commodities. Since he comes into the world neither with a looking glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtean philosopher, to whom "I am I" is sufficient, man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. (Marx, qtd in Asendorf 30)

The object thus emerges as the ideal mirror: for the images it reflects succeed one another while never contradicting one another. Moreover, it is ideal in that it reflects images not of what is real, but only of what is desirable. In short, it is like a dog reduced to the single aspect of fidelity. I am able to gaze on it without its gazing back at me. *This is why one invests in objects all that one finds impossible to invest in human relationships.* (Baudrillard 11).

The spectacle is ideology par excellence, because it is exposes and manifests in its fullness the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, servitude,

and negation of real life. The spectacle is materially “the expression of the separation and estrangement between man and man.” (Debord §215)

[A]n obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man. (Foucault, qtd in Mattelart 24)

[S]pectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered. Likewise, counter-forms of attention are neither exclusively visual but rather constituted as other temporalities and cognitive states, such as those in trance or reverie. (Crary, *Suspension* 3)

To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 49)

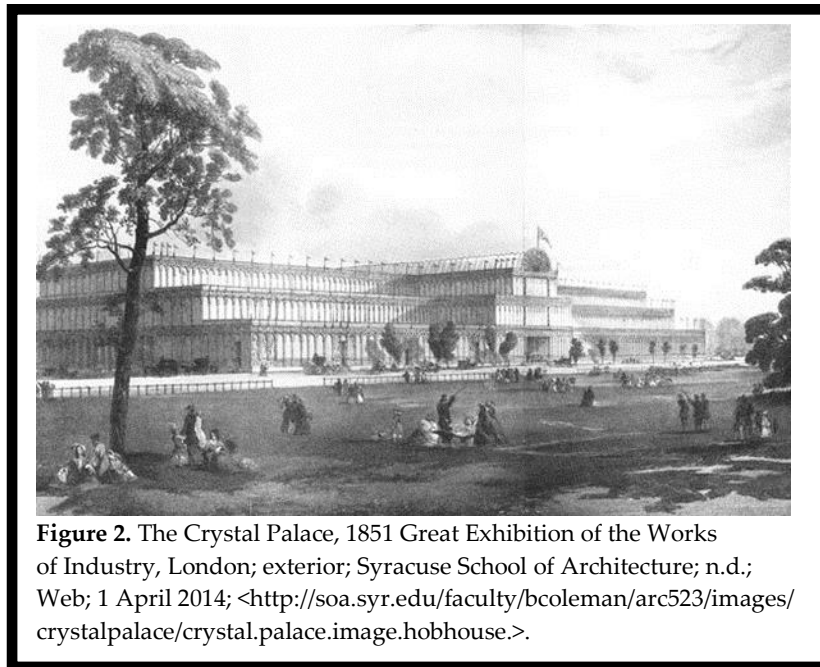
[E]nchantment entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound. ... You notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds The world comes alive as a collection of singularities. (Bennett 5)

Rhythm is ... the principle of presence that opens and maintains the work of art in its original space. ... But what, then, is the essence of rhythm? ... [A]n infinite numerical succession ... is the dimension of time that is familiar to us and that our chronometers measure with ever greater precision Yet rhythm—as we commonly understand it—appears to introduce into this eternal flow a split and a stop. Thus in a musical piece, although it is somehow in time, we perceive rhythm as something that escapes the incessant flight of instants and appears almost as the presence of atemporal dimension in time. In the same way, when we are before a work of art or a landscape bathed in the light of its own presence, we perceive a stop in time, as though we were suddenly thrown into a more original time. ... We are as though held, arrested before something, but this being arrested is also a being-outside, an *ek-stasis* in a more original dimension.

(Agamben 99)

Art takes time. To spend an hour with a painting is difficult. The public gallery experience is one that encourages art at a trot. There are the paintings, the marvelous speaking works, definite, independent, each with a Self it would be impossible to ignore, if...if..., it were possible to see it. (Winterson 7, her ellipses)

* * *



If the medieval world that Agamben describes was embodied by the cabinet of wonder, with its non-hierarchized mishmash of artifacts all of which equally reflected the scope of a shared worldview pre-existing the alienated and fractured character of human

activity and self-understanding that is so pronounced today, then in the nineteenth century the glass-enclosed arcades, and especially the iconic Crystal Palace (see figures 2 and 3), exemplify for us the spectacle of that infinitely variegated symptom and agent of our alienation, the commodity. Armand Mattelart lays out a broad history of modernity in *The Invention of Communication*, understanding “communication” as “encompassing the multiple circuits of exchange and circulation of goods, people, and messages” (xiv). With the rise of capitalism and a “society of flows,” as he terms it (beginning no later than the seventeenth century), our relations to one another and to ourselves, our perceptions of the phenomenal world, and indeed the very structure of subjectivity begin a long process of increasingly rapid transformation. Christoph Asendorf tracks a similar trajectory in his *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and their Perception in Modernity*. Following Marx, he laments that with the “transformation of materiality into abstraction ... in a society devoted to commodity production” (Asendorf 6), we no longer enjoy a direct connection to the natural world, the products of our labor, nor to one another.

Mattelart and Asendorf both analyze how the new communication and commuting technologies—most notably roadways, railways, networks of telegraph and then telephone lines, and the standardization of weights and measures, including, perhaps most fundamentally, that of time—is to mechanize the body-laborer and organicize the master-machine. All of life becomes further abstracted, alienated, and

mechanized. For Mattelart, these world-transforming and world-shrinking technologies and measures, along with the new statistics with its construction of the “average” person, constitute essential components of the biopower regime whereby the Modern subject is, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, “disciplined” into being¹¹. As such, this subject is regulated and controlled by forces endemic to its own structure. The Parisian boulevard offers a new perception and experience of space, conditioning the emergence of the glass-enclosed marketplaces of the arcade (that great-grandfather to the Mall of America in all of its now global incarnations).

Glass, so like light made solid. Like light, the material properties of glass, especially crystal, have supported endless idealizations. Its mathematical symmetry and transparent solidity—as if the very air has been caught mid-flight—has left the medium of glass “predestined from the start to be a carrier of notions of harmonious and ideal order” (Asendorf 22). From the Divine Splendor it represents in the Book of Revelations to the Crystal Palace of London’s First World Exposition of 1851 (billed as the “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations”), crystal has provided the material support and poetic figuration of many utopian dreams, the “purified crystal from which any and all irregularity is banned ... aim[ed] at a regulation of the drives” (Mattelart 112; Asendorf 25). It is the very image of the abstraction and spectacle of the commodity fetish. The glass sky of the palace of Industry and Commerce, in its many

¹¹ See, in particular, Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.

forms, shimmers with empty promises and the seduction of one's own alienation in the aura of the commodity-fetish which appears as fulfillment of the exciting new desires it produces, the mechanism of which commoditization is both invisible and reflective, as we more and more come to find our image on its surface, which, like Baudrillard's fetish objects, reflects only one fantasy and desire after another, but never reality. Indeed it produces the very desire it "reflects," and it is we as much as it who "like a dog [are] reduced to the single aspect of fidelity." In such a hall of phantasms and alien-made innermost desires, "no vantage point allows the evaluation of ... real distances and dimensions, and so *everything becomes immaterial*" (Yves Stourdzé, in Mattelart 113).

With the rise of the commodity fetish and spectacle, the once simple marketplace of foodstuffs and bartered goods, where things still retained their use-value, becomes in the arcades of modernity a bedazzling kaleidoscope of heterogeneous commodities. The abstracted im-materiality of this spectacular heterogeneity produces the new perceptual skills and modes of attention it necessitates. The potential buyer strolling through the arcade must be able to shift quickly between diffuse and focused attention. Whether in the arcade or the museum ("the gallery"), she must be able to scan for that before which she will want to pause, closely inspect, and contemplate *buying*, just like any good bargain-hunter or museum-goer today who wants to get her money-time's worth. The circulatory machinery of the capitalist system upgrades its human hardware for a faster, more efficient and "user-friendly" system.

In *Suspensions of Perception*, Jonathan Crary undertakes a Foucauldian genealogy of “a perception that can be both an absorption *and* an absence or deferral” (10).

This problem [of attention] was elaborated within an emergent economic system that demanded attentiveness of a subject in a wide range of new productive and spectacular tasks, but whose internal movement was continually eroding the basis of any disciplinary attentiveness. Part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as *natural* switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another. Capital, as accelerated exchange and circulation, necessarily produced this kind of human perceptual adaptability and became a regime of reciprocal attentiveness and distraction. (Crary, *Suspensions* 29-30)

The material conditions of modernity, those of the crystal-arcade, of the factory, and the railroad (with its speedy transport and its distortions of the world flying by outside), undermine the very perceptual modes of attention that they demand. Our attention has become ever more flighty and fleeting and “Attention Deficit Disorder,” as Crary points out, is becoming a normalized mode of consciousness and may soon not need “correcting” (Crary *Suspensions* 1). What I have heretofore attempted to outline is a broad historical development of perception, in which modern technologies and regimes of biopower produce subjects who are alienated from their own desire and enjoyment, primarily passive and pliable to the ends of capital, of which they largely become functions, even if there is a tension between such a subject’s capacities for concentrated

labor, on one hand, and for consumption, on the other, as Crary's work makes evident. This is the context in which contemporary visual artists work (the same context, of course, in which we all live). If the body and its perceptions are formed and re-formed in relation to the material conditions of its world, then spectacular culture, as the world of the modern subject, is ground zero for the cultural work of articulating variations on current modes of embodiment and subjectivity.

The work of contemporary installation artist Olafur Eliasson may prove to be an exemplary case for working through and against the spectacular formation of the modern subject. Working roughly in the tradition of the Light and Space Movement of the 1960's and 70's, Eliasson has produced numerous light and "elemental-based" (rock, water, moss, ice, mist, etc.), yet highly technologically sophisticated, sculptural works and immersive environments. Eliasson's works are simultaneously sociological experiments and phenomenological investigations into the nature of human perception. In what is generally designated as his first mature work, *Beauty* (1993), a mist of water is produced in the gallery space and lights manipulated to form a rainbow. The crux of this piece is that one can only see it from certain perspectives, so as you move through the space you discover it, or wonder what the person just feet away from you is "oohing" and "aahing" about until you move to take a look from their angle. Certainly in works such as *Room for one colour*, *Your colour memory*, and *360° room for all colours* (all of which involve altering the color of the space and those in it) involve other people as

visual elements of the piece, but they also encourage interaction and reflection on the other's experience.

As I have said, the limits of every aesthetic "object" must shift from encounter to encounter as they extend to incorporate each viewing subject's aesthetic experience. Eliasson's work is especially geared towards this essential feature of the art work. As Daniel Birnbaum puts it, "in Eliasson's case, the contribution of the viewer is so central to the works that one might wager the claim that this very activity is what they are about" (131). But we should take this further to say that his installations depend not just on a single viewer, but on at least two, and on their observations of and even interactions with one another.

While certainly other people in these spaces become a visual element in the works themselves, instead of (or not only) reducing people to mere spectacles, the works generate desire in people to interact and bring attention not only to the strangely colored surfaces of others, but to their subjectivities, their individual personal perceptions and experiences which, due to the temporal and perspectival nature of the installations, may be very similar or very different, depending on when you each entered the room or where in it you are standing in relation to one another; you are not, however, mere objects for one another's entertainment. The lure of the spectacle seduces one *towards* the other, in recognition of her subjectivity, and not away from her

in an objectifying, appropriative gesture. Here again Eliasson's work reveals its social and ethical force.

Eliasson's installations, at their most radical and ambitious—which is also precisely when they most risk falling into spectacle—transform the museum space and the way in which viewers experience it. Rather than rushing through and glancing at this and now that painting or sculpture, clicking a quick picture of her friends in front of the Van Gogh or Pollack and then dashing off to “see” the next must-see item on the list, the you are invited—and if you are to actually “see” the work for what it is and experience its full effects, it is necessary—to stop and take the time to experience the work, as Eliasson's title, *Take your time* makes perfectly clear. Linger with it, the title exhorts you, let its effects unfold: the multi-colored lights and shadows moving across the walls and other viewers' bodies, the single saturated color that fills every cranny of a room with more density and substance than any light you've seen before, that acts directly upon your senses, if you allow it, if you linger long enough to wonder what it's “about,” what it's supposed “to do.” Forget the demands of the regimented time of the business day, then, and relax, linger, contemplate.

In so doing, the reactions and investigative behaviors of your fellow museum-goers become a part of the experience as much as any other aspect of the piece. Your awareness of what you are seeing, “seeing yourself seeing,” as Eliasson often says, and the questions of how you are perceiving in this manner and what exactly everyone else

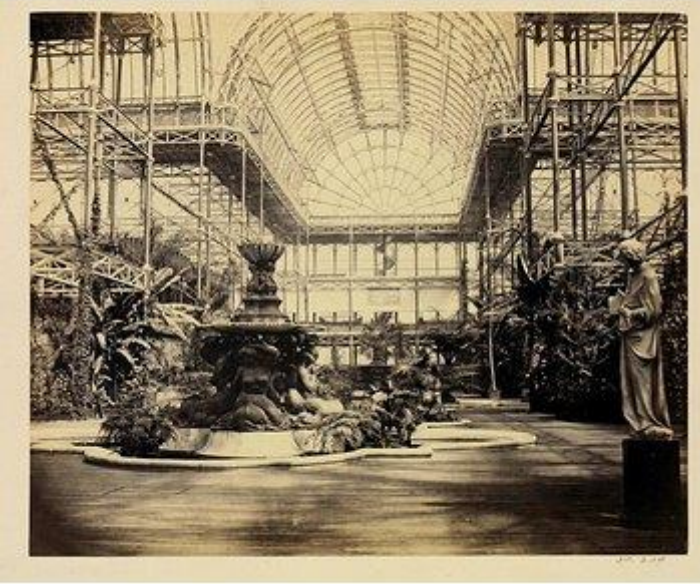


Figure 3. The Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park, built for the Great Exhibition of 1851; interior photo by Philip Henry Delamotte (1854); Victoria and Albert Museum; n.d.; Web; 1 April 2014. <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85633/interior-view-crystal-palace-photograph-delamotte-philip-henry/>>.

sees are essential components of the experience. While certainly other people in these spaces become spectacles themselves, part of the visual scenery, Eliasson's work is at its most powerful when it is dangerously close to collusion with spectacular logic. For there is herein an ethics to the work, or a possibility for

fostering an ethics. The experience of Eliasson's work might be described thus: "We enter into an experience of the work in which neither subject nor object can claim authority or dominance" (Grynsztejn 23). This, I believe, has the potential to transfer beyond one's own perceptual experience and into one's relations with others. Indeed, the work occasions an encounter that is at once sufficient of itself and that produces a desire for another, more fulfilling encounter: one with other human beings, not objects over which to exercise authority or power, but subjects with whom we can communicate, with whom we have a shared experience, indeed the enchanting

experience of being transformed, if only perceptually and temporarily. Perhaps the shift in perspective such works enable might be more permanent?

Perhaps no single show has attracted as many viewers as his 2003 installation, *The weather project*, which two million people saw in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London as that year's commission for the Unilever series (see figure 3). Upon entering the space,

they saw that its architectural contours had been obscured—or made fluid and seemingly boundless by—a hazy atmosphere resembling light London fog,

actually an artificial mist

pumped in sixteen visible

nozzles attached to

humming motors set

throughout. Ahead of the

visitor, at the far end of the

hall's five hundred-foot-

long expanse and at a

height of about ninety feet,

hung a giant yellow orb

like a dark winter sun. Above, some three hundred mirrored ceiling panels

spanned the entire chamber, covering a total area of just over thirty-two thousand

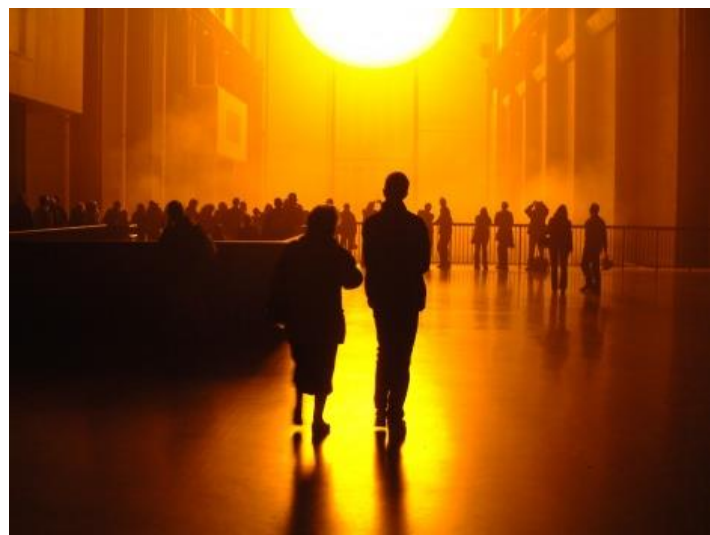


Figure 4. Olafur Eliasson; *The weather project*; 2003; monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminum, and scaffolding; 26.7 m x 22.3 m x 155.4 m; installation in Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London. n.d.; Web; 1 April 2014. < <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project>>.

square feet. The hall's already gargantuan proportions were reversed and doubled by the reflections in these panels, which were suspended from the nearly hundred-foot-high roof so that their trussing was visible to visitors on the museum's uppermost floor. (Grynsztejn 11)

People would often lie on their backs to see themselves in the ceiling mirror, and groups would work together to form patterns, such as the peace sign, or words.

Taking the indoor rainbow of Eliasson's early *Beauty* to a whole other level (and was not entirely unlike the interior of the Crystal Palace; see figures 3 and 4), the "sun" he placed in The Tate Modern, a piece titled *The weather project*, was constructed of a "semi-circular steel frame, fifty feet in diameter, fitted with approximately two hundred yellow sodium lamps of the kind used for streetlights" (Grynsztejn 11-12). This display of the installations' technics is key to the work. Eliasson foregrounds his technical apparatuses to make evident their material supports. "Perhaps the technics of ideology—as much as the phenomenology of the subject—are what Eliasson's perception machines are staging. Perhaps his work illustrates the terms by which we perceive and accept everyday reality—whether nature or the museum or the amusement park—as so much techno-mediation" (Lee 47). Its laid-bare technical apparatuses serve as metaphor for the machinations of ideology (in the Althusserian sense) or power (in the Foucauldian), of the ways in which reality is "constructed." Our perceptions and bodily comportments are not merely "innocent" of these forces, but

shaped and animated by them (just as our notions of “beauty” are). Eliasson pulls back the proverbial curtain on what Jacques Rancière terms the “distribution of the sensible”:

It is a delimitation of space and time, the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics* 13)

Eliasson’s works demarcate in this fashion the “politics of aesthetics” and the forces that subtend and form our everyday lives, making them visible where before they were invisible, rippling their otherwise smooth surfaces. It is only by their transparency that such forces function as seamlessly as they do.

Eliasson literally and proverbially shines a light on the “Crystal Palace” of commodified culture and its calcified perceptual and affective modes of being. To modify an earlier citation from Susan Sontag, “All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the [artist] must be assessed” (13-14). And Eliasson’s works sometimes literally deploy smoke and mirrors. His uses of mirrors, glass, and colored and reflected light is far different, however, than that of the department store, television, the rock concert, the flash animation of online advertisements, or the Crystal

Palace and arcade that are their distant forebears. The “profane-transcendental” quality of the Crystal Palace and its contemporary analogs, “in which the reality of the world, as exhibition, becomes dematerialized,” is not simplistically reproduced in Eliasson’s work, but undermined. Eliasson exploits the lure of spectacle that our culture has habituated us to. By offering what seem like (merely) entertaining, indeed, *fascinating* spectacles that will satisfy our culturally-produced need for passive stimulus, Eliasson draws large crowds into experiences that instead confound its logic. Rather than dematerializing the world, Eliasson’s work places us as embodied subjects in a physical world, one with which we do not just passively “experience” but actively create to the extent that our world is delimited and defined by the contingencies of our sensorium, contingencies which are not merely biological and universal, but cultural and historical. His work explodes the nature/culture binary, as well as that of self and other, allowing one to be, as one viewer reported on SFMoMA’s feedback website, “inside and outside at the same time.” It is worth reproducing a whole collection of these responses, as further testimonies to the power of the piece.

* * *

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art visitor feedback on *360° room for all colours*:¹²

Tom Smith

Posted September 19, 2007 at 2:52 pm | [Permalink](#)

When looking close to the wall I fell into the “ganzfeld” and saw the “floaters” in my eye and the blood vessels too! I was in and out at the same time!

Dee Glensor

Posted October 17, 2007 at 5:14 am | [Permalink](#)

This one is particularly intriguing, as one steps as close to the color as possible it feels as if one is being swallowed by it. It is an incredible experience to completely lose oneself in the light as the colors change.

Darryl Ferrucci

Posted October 29, 2007 at 2:59 pm | [Permalink](#)

One of the best parts is to watch the changing of colors on the faces of the people inside. If you are shy to stare at strangers, go in with a friend so you can look at each other for a while as the colors change. Very beautiful, and very different from only looking at the wall.

¹² I have not edited or corrected these, but reproduced them as they were posted, including typos, misspellings, etc.

kt

Posted November 9, 2007 at 10:04 am | [Permalink](#)

Most breathtaking of all was the 360 degree room for all colours. I walked in to see people standing close to the wall, looking slightly hypnotized. I walked right up to the wall and did the same. All of a sudden, the light consumes your peripheral vision, and you feel like you are enveloped in hues of yellow, orange, blue, pink, green, purple and white. What struck me was how my body physically reacted to the changes in color. Pink and orange gave me butterflies, like I was seeing a boy I had a crush on. Whereas blue made me feel serene and reminded me of when I was scuba diving and would float weightlessly into the abyss. I let the emotions roll through me as the light entered and passed through my physical being like a drug. I could have stayed there and experienced the permutations for hours.

Benard Hecker

Posted December 31, 2007 at 1:43 pm | [Permalink](#)

It is absolutely amazing how engrossing this simple installation is. The other people in the room became totally part of the art work to me. Fantastic! Unusual museum fare: Art as experience, rather than as object.

blap

Posted January 19, 2008 at 3:35 pm | [Permalink](#)

I thought about experiencing a day, what the light tells me sub conciously about warpth/season/time and let my inner mind wander with the light. A compressed day/week/year.

frank

Posted January 22, 2008 at 6:25 pm | [Permalink](#)

I felt like suddenly i had no body, only mind floating in time. at times the lights became so bright i thought i must close my eyes but i didnt. i sometimes focused on all the things i did see but usually ignored, floaters, blood cells in my retinas vessels. i want to live there.

olive

Posted February 3, 2008 at 3:30 pm | [Permalink](#)

i like it when it's all red and you look like a murderer.when it's blue-ish it looks like snow or water.

i love it.

Gypsy

Posted February 16, 2008 at 1:49 pm | [Permalink](#)

I felt like I walked into infinity...

Oliver A

Posted November 26, 2007 at 10:19 am | [Permalink](#)

I took my three-year old son he loved all of Eliasson's stuff, but especially the 360 degree room. We sat in the middle of it for at least five minutes and just let the changing colors envelop us. This is a great exhibit for young children because it is so immersive and encourages interaction. Every piece offers a unique sense of discovery.

* * *

It is in the summer of 2008 when I, myself, see *Take your time* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As the escalator ascends to the floor where it is installed, the stairs propel you out of the world as you knew it and into *Room for one colour*. Using special narrow frequency bulbs, the room is permeated with a "thick," almost visceral yellow light that changes the color of your skin and clothes, of everything in the space, leaving people looking at their arms and everyone around them in amazement and amusement. People are excitedly taking pictures (will it look the same in photos; what's the physics,

the optics, involved; will the “thickness” transfer or be lost?). *Beauty* is included in this multi-gallery retrospective show, as well, along with several dazzling, perception-engaging and -altering works. But none of them is as intense as *360° room for all colours*.

I walk into a “room” created by an approximately 11’ tall length of projection foil curved into a circle, left open at front to form an entrance. If in *Beauty* we encounter the spectrum only at a distance, only from a determinate angle, in walking into *360° room for all colours* we walk into the rainbow itself (it occurs to me now, perhaps *Room for one colour* is meant to have us walk into the center of the sun Eliasson had placed in the Tate?). Across this screen is projected from behind all the colors of the spectrum, which flow along and around it continuously and slowly, so that the space transforms gradually from greenish to bluish to orange, and so on. After the yellow corridor of *Room for one colour*, I look around me at all the other people to see how they might be transformed. The effect is not as dramatic as that of the yellow and yellowing room, not as “thick,” and it seems merely the spectacle of an atmosphere that constantly changes with the colors of light from the screen casting itself over those gathered into the interior of the circle. I’m not impressed. And then I notice a few people standing right up against the surface, facing not inwards, not into the space, getting a better look at everyone’s curious, disappointed, or bewildered faces, but rather their backs are turned to the rest of us; they’re looking directly at the screen.

Standing just inches away, I immediately understand why. After a few moments I take off my glasses, as the frames seem to float between my eyes and the screen as an obstruction to the experience. This close, the colors beam straight into my eyes. They take over my consciousness to varying degrees. Sometimes it is as though there were nothing but color, sometimes I am very aware of myself, standing there looking at the colors. This green seems further away, and I am aware of the distance between us. A particular blue washes into everything and I feel as though I “am” it, a part of it, as it radiates infinitely away (but away from whom or what, what can “away” mean now?). And red. Red is the most intense of all. The red feels as if it emanates not from any “there” but from inside my eyes themselves, which send it flowing outwards so it can wash back to them (if such distinction as “out” and “in” or “to” and “from” make any sense here). The *oohs* and *aahs* from other people are audible, in the moments when I become aware again, for a duration, of my surroundings (but I am all duration, only the status of this duration is fluxing and pulsing, graduating from hot to cool, interior to exterior, nearness to distance), and I wonder what half-conscious involuntary sounds I have made during this intense sensory experience. I tell myself just one color more, one more, and another.... It is hard to pull myself away.

In this interval, this enchanted suspension of measured time, I was made more aware of my body. I saw myself seeing. If at times I felt as though I had no body, was pure perception beyond the dichotomy of subject and object, the experience only made

me more aware of myself in another moment, an awareness made new, a reflexivity different from the self-consciousness so ubiquitous in modernity. I had no idea how long I had stood there, mesmerized, feeling my own sense of self wax and wane with the tides of light. Eventually, I knew, it had to end. This duration. This pure interval of time, ek-static—time standing outside itself, me standing outside myself, inside, inside out—apart from the constructed time of mechanized, routinized modernity, determined by the demands of the marketplace. “The history of mechanical time measurement by means of a clock dovetails with the history of the economy. The tower clock of the late Middle Ages is, after all, no arbitrary technological innovation but a herald of the secular transformation of the ‘church’s time’ into the ‘merchant’s time’” (Asendorf 142). Interval in which I am in a sense given back my body.

That form of time of which I have just been relieved, then, and to which I am even now re-entering, as I turn from the screen on which the colors go on pulsing and the museum space opens once again before me: the strict measurements of the payroll punch clock. “The clock is the first automatic machine applied to practical purposes; the whole theory of production and regular motion was developed through it” (Marx, in an 1863 letter to Engels, qtd in Asendorf 143). Even sex is bartered for and traded, used as marketing tool and literally bought and sold. Even this exhibition was only acquired for the price of admission. Even this experience is commodified by the museum institution.

Eliasson's work is made spectacular commodity, then, but it acts ultimately to counter the spectacle, activating rather than shutting down agency and subjectivity, active participation and a regard for the subjectivity of others, and for this reason I call his work anti-spectacular and, in Jane Bennett's sense, "enchanted." As my epigraph from her expounds, such enchantment or wonder entails "the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement." In this "momentarily immobilizing encounter, ... [t]he world comes alive as a collection of singularities." Nothing in our modern experience can escape, utterly and completely, the panoramic gaze of panoptic power, referenced by Eliasson's use of panoramic format in such works as *360° room for all colours* and *Your colour memory*. About *Your colour memory*, a piece very similar to *360° room* in structure (see figure 5), Jonathan Crary has written that Eliasson

uses a quasi-panoramic format in part to reaffirm and reclaim the corporal features of human vision. Rather than construct an external field of visual objects to be consumed by an individual viewer, his panoramic format breaks down some basic, epistemological assumptions about the positions and identities of what is commonly thought to be a subject and object. Through his astonishing deployment of changing hues, he strikingly reveals the precariousness of our notions about what belongs to the world and what belongs to us as perceivers. He is self-consciously working with luminous duration and intensity so as to

bring into play the subjective features of human vision associated with after-images. ("Your colour memory" 1)

Its citation of panoptic power does not reproduce it, however, but brings its mechanisms into view so that we can recognize them. More radically, it offers us an experience that may succeed for a moment in creating a space of time at once beyond it and at its very center. The disciplined distribution of space and time which Rancière discusses is here disrupted, realigned or held at bay, if only temporarily. Long enough, to be sure, to provide an ek-static distance from it so as to recognize it as anything but given, natural, inevitable. To this end, the experience one has with

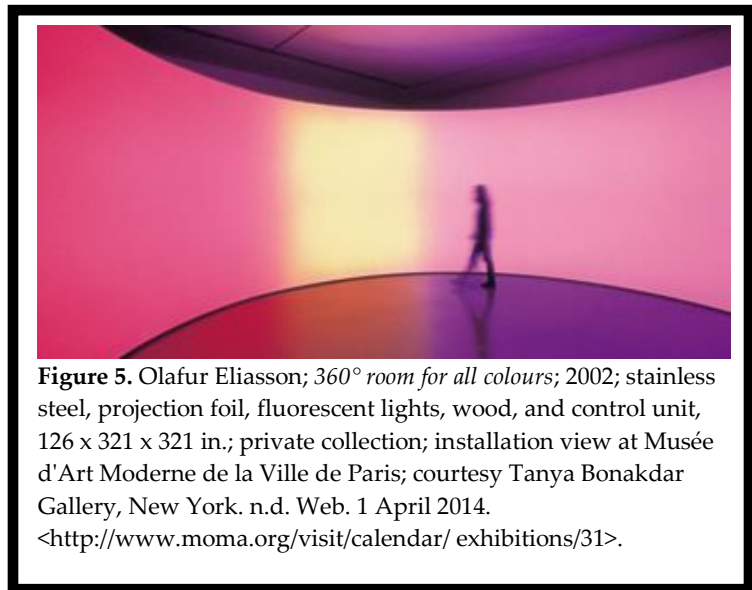


Figure 5. Olafur Eliasson; *360° room for all colours*; 2002; stainless steel, projection foil, fluorescent lights, wood, and control unit, 126 x 321 x 321 in.; private collection; installation view at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. n.d. Web. 1 April 2014. <<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/31>>.

360° room for all colours may subtend and inform the entire rest of *Take your time*, the rest of his oeuvre, revealing the full implications of the transparency of his technical apparatus which he consciously highlights in his works' constructions. Only in *360° room for all colours* might one not see the source of the light, partially hidden and not immediately recognizable. Such are the mechanisms of the panopticon, ideology, the distribution of the sensible, the desire of the Other in all its philosophical guises.

One might live one's whole life differently, perhaps, after such a revelation. We might not be able to ascribe so much to Eliasson's art alone; these installations, situations, and experiences offer a kind of demonstration of the ideas of the relativity and ideological and corporeal contingency of experience as one may already be intellectually aware. They may also, perhaps, give rise to such ideas, themselves, but certainly, in the least, these installations powerfully underscore them. Eliasson's work also, in focusing on the lived body as grounds for engagement with the world, on experience as product of that dialectical engagement that produces subjectivity, also focuses on the ways in which every (re)iteration of sedimented ideology holds the potential for betraying its program and iterating itself differently. This is where philosopher Judith Butler, for one, finds a space for potential resistance within the seemingly all-encompassing 360° scope of power. The body, for Butler, is not simply or entirely a given, but an historical made. Its specificities, from sex and race to the senses themselves, are "materialized"

through a forcible reiteration of those [regulatory] norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of regulatory law can be turned

against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (2)

One might experience, might live one's bodily subjectivity differently, might shore up with such experiences as Eliasson's wondrous installations the knowledge that the "given" is made, at the very least shaped and shapeable from the outside, and that the assault of a landscape of advertisements and brain-deadening media can be countered with another form of attention and absorption, one that brings you "back" to yourself—or offers a first opportunity for the precipitation of a self, of desires, affects, perceptions, and pleasures not fundamentally enslaved to these deadening forces, opens for you a potential for agency, however much chance may direct its outcome, instead of evacuating you of will and filling you with a desire for self-commodification and the eroticization of your own alienation, your subjectivation qua function of the system of commodity fetishism. Perhaps it opens a doorway, previously closed (or lights a way to the one standing open all long, but which you could not see), to your fundamental, world-making *poietic* capacities as a person among and with persons in this world which we co-inhabit. I do not mean to claim manifesto-style that Eliasson's work (or any single body of work, or single division or field of knowledge and inquiry) can alone instigate some sort of revolution of the senses, of bodies and desires. Those claims seem well-worn by such movements as Futurism and Surrealism, whose failures serve as cautionary tales. What I do claim is that the accumulation of any such

resistances, shifts in intellectual perspective and, perhaps, even physical perception, no matter how small or short-lived they may be, can and indeed do contribute to the continual *articulation* of the body (its rematerialization, in Butler's sense) and of available forms of subjectivity. "This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible" (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 49).

Eliasson's enchanting anti-spectacles offer another mode of experience apart from the "boulevard" experience of the modern city, awash in billboards and window displays as much as in sunlight, in the onslaught of stimuli and simulacra that shut down agency and thought, constrain subjective possibilities, and reiterate the same, again. If Crary is right in saying (to refer back to my epigraphs) that "spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject *see*, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and *inhabit time* as disempowered," then *360° room for all colours* is as potentially empowering an experience as any. Its ek-static interval, a sort of "trance or reverie," as it may be, is not where the experience ends.

As I turn back to face the interior of the *360° room*, I find that I don't want to leave the space immediately. Looking around at the people again, I watch those come in as curious and as yet unimpressed as I was, myself, at first. I watch the people at the screens, knowing what they know. I feel as though I have experienced the full range of

subjectivity and individuation, from being a member of a crowd to feeling a hyper self-awareness of myself as a person looking, seeing, perceiving the light but utterly cut off from his surroundings, and finally, most amazingly, to the sensation at once psychological and somatic, of being washed out completely into the color. I was made more aware of my body, the sole vehicle and ground of this experience. I have thereby become aware of the fluidity of subjectivity, and not just as an idea; comprehension here gives way to experience, an experience, in part, of the dissolution of experience, a destitution of identity or ego that requires a reassertion if not reassessment of self, the kind of rearticulation Butler ascribes to materialization. Having turned again to the public space of the museum room, I feel compelled to reclaim my identity as a social being, to connect in any superficial way to another person, but have come to the museum alone today. Not even thinking of the cheesy irony of the locution, but saying the first thing I could think to say to a stranger standing next to me, I turn and ask the man standing closest to me if he has the time.

The crystalline abstraction of Eliasson's work constitutes its own utopian gesture, one anathema to the spectral idealism of the Crystal Palace and the aura of the commodity fetish. Eliasson's utopian gesture is towards embodiment, towards the reflexivity of the perceiving consciousness and the refraction of the subject, by dint of which she might reiterate the terms of her subjectivation differently. His abstraction is a negation of the abstraction of commoditization, the "separation of the body from the

subject” and the petrification of the latter which Asendorf diagnoses as central to the alienating project of modernity (45). In countering such forces, Eliasson employs the very senses of the subject herself, but also her intellection. The anti-spectacle elements of the pieces work directly on the sensorium, while the technical and social aspects engage the participant’s thought processes. As Mieke Bal writes, his work

employs theatrical means, with the pleasure of artifice that entails, to offer—to perform and stimulate—in-depth reflection that can be properly called philosophical. ... Catching this philosophizing in the act, then, we are able to see how each piece contributes to what the ensemble most profoundly points out: that art “thinks” –not illustrating prior thoughts but actually cogitating. And since this thinking requires the participation of viewers, the task of provisionally completing the thought befalls the visitor ... (Bal, “The Politics of Light” 159).

The more adrift on the crystalline sea of commodity fetishism and panoptic power we are, the less able we will be to map out new coordinates, to crystallize articulations of current subjective structures, and to produce new liquefactions. If spectacular culture de-materializes the subject, which is to say, *materializes* it, in Butler’s sense, primarily as resource and product enmeshed in forces of its reduction to pure exchange value, Eliasson’s work might be one source of a heightened sense of one’s corporeal and social being. Anti-spectacular works as radically complicit and subversive, as differently reiterative and philosophically performative as Eliasson’s can

return the body to its subject, re-materialize it in an iterative discontinuity, a pulse of the light, ever so slightly out of sync with Times Square.

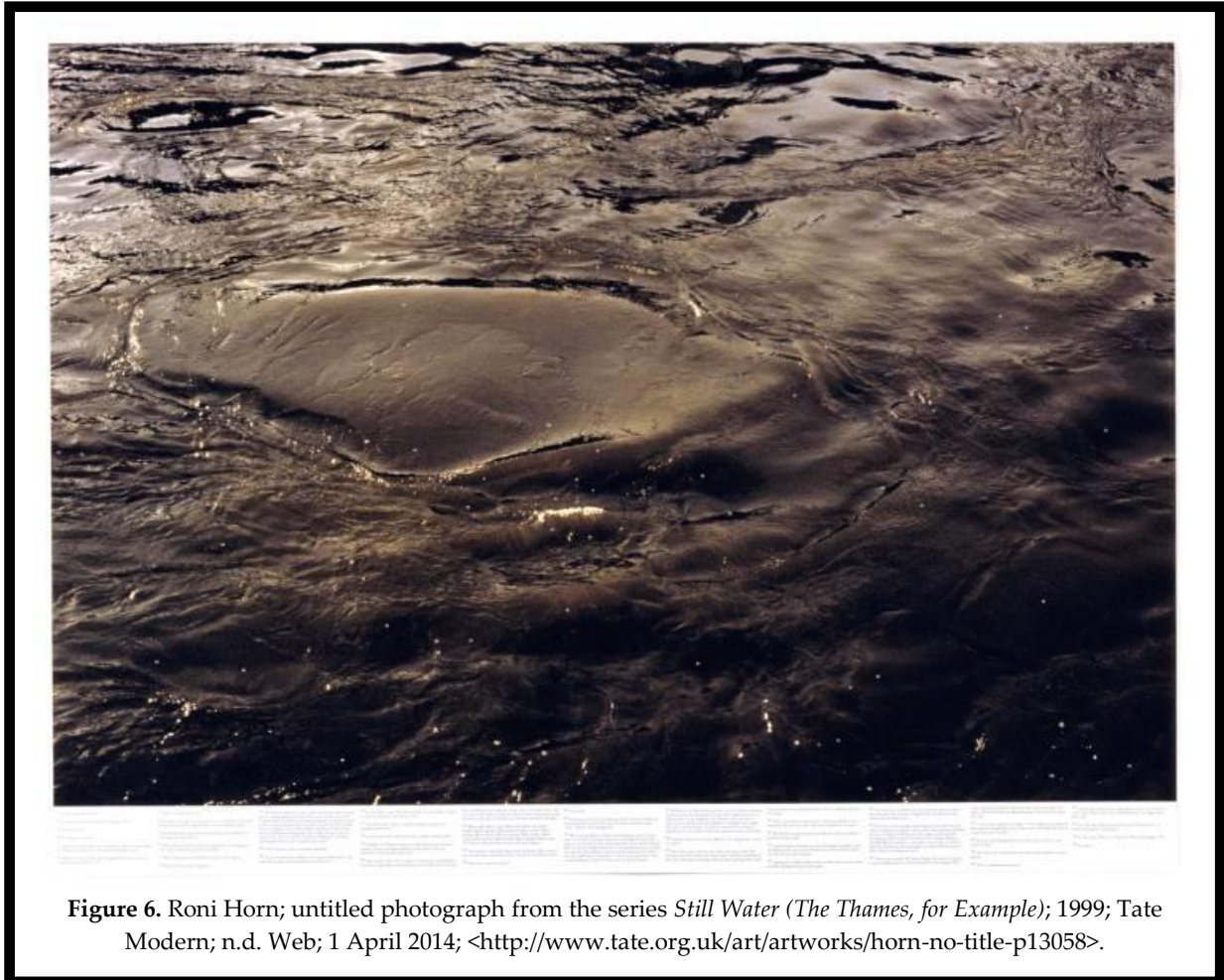
CHAPTER 5

WHAT OR WHETHER CHANCE CONDITIONS (THE VAGARIES OF ENCOUNTER)

Water is always an intimate experience, even as rain or ocean or river. Water is always an intimate experience; you can't separate yourself from it. Water is always a personal experience; your relationship to water is your relationship to yourself. You say water is troubled or calm. You say water is rough and restless. You say water is disturbed. You say water is quiet, water is serene, and sometimes clear. It might be pure, and then it is brilliant. Water is heavy, that's a fact. Water is often tranquil, even placid. Water is still, and then it might be deep as well. Water is cold or hot, chilly or tepid. You say water is brash or brisk, sometimes crisp. You say water is soft and hard. You say water irritates and lubricates. You say water is foul. You say water is fresh. You say water is limpid and languorous. You say water is sweet. ...

The opacity of the world dissipates in water. Black water cannot dissipate the opacity of the world. ... When you see yourself reflected in water, do you recognize the water in you? What is the darkness in the Thames? Is it London? (Horn)

* * *



In the summer of 2009, I went to London on a research grant. Through a university contact, a woman who had interviewed but not hired me for a summer teaching job a year or two before, whose sister's girlfriend lived in a relatively cheap communal living situation in a block of three large row houses in Islington set up much like a residential hotel, one which rented out rooms to guests with resident connections, I was able to

spend nearly a month there. From across the street from the Islington Tube station, I took a bus to St. Paul's Cathedral, crossed the Millennial Bridge, and walked into the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern (where Olafur Eliasson's *The weather project* had been installed, where, three years later, I would see Tino Sehgal's 2012 contribution to the same Unilever series, the relational-performance installation titled *These Associations*). I wandered around, both aimlessly and on a mission to find my main object of interest, Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* installation, a contemporary "cabinet of curiosities" pulled from the famous river of its title. Wandered from room to room, floor to floor. I let sit for the moment the exhibition of Futurist art I also wanted to see. I had a quick peek into the café. I accidentally wandered into the library. The search through the museum for the work was a bit like the trawling of the depth and length along the banks of the Thames that Dion and his team conducted to collect the various objects that inhabited his cabinet. I happily wandered about, allowing it to drift into my presence when it saw fit. Trawled every floor, floor by floor, artwork by artwork, all the way up to the fifth floor, where I stumbled upon *Roni Horn* AKA *Roni Horn*, the artist's first major exhibition in the United Kingdom. It included her photographic series, *You Are the Weather*, 1994-5, composed of 100 close-up shots of an Icelandic woman in water, and her 1999 series of fifteen photographs of the surface of the Thames, *Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)*. Each photo in the latter series (see figure 6) is spangled with tiny numerals corresponding to footnoted quotations meditating on the nature and poetry of

water typed in the white border beneath the image. Horn explains that each footnote “gives confluence to this spot on the paper ... to this undulation in the water, to this greenish color of ink deployed to image the water, to the idea of water, all water, to the sensual surface of this paper, to the moment when you happened upon this number, and to you in that moment” (Tate Modern). (Or had I just missed it? Did I catch the show later, at the Whitney? None of the dates in my calendar, as I recorded them, put me in the right place at the right time, but I know, I feel sure, that I have seen these photographs. I remember them. I remember reading the texts on the photos I cannot make out in any of the images I can find of them online. I could not have conjured it so accurately in advance in a dream; I do not believe in such things.) I was more and more perplexed, more and more anxious about finding the piece I was here to experience, in person, extensively, repeatedly, intimately. But these photos, these beautiful meditations on water, calmed me. I went out to the nearby balcony to look out over the river itself, to feel again, as I had felt walking over the bridge, pausing and staring out over it, its appeal, its pull, its call. Whispering into my ear there as I watched it from the balcony was the voice of Roni Horn, her sentences forming an ever-looping sound installation, *Saying Water*, in which the artist delivers a poetic monologue on the topic, composed of all of the stories and literary citations beneath the photographs. Both the photographic essay and this accompanying poem-installation directly engage both thinking—the processing of language and interacting with it that produces

significations—and our senses of vision and hearing (not to mention our sense memories of the feeling of water on our skin, just as much present and a part of the piece). “At the very borderline between sensation and thought is wonder” (Grynysztein 27). It has everything to do with surprise, with the “unexpected arrival of the impression that alters the motion of the spirits” (Descartes 58).

The other side of wonder is horror, and it was horror that I began to feel as I started recognizing exhibitions, started backtracking over newly familiar territory, having gone back down to the second floor and through the Futurist centennial—quickly now—circling back, circling around, circling down—and no, there was no more museum on the other side of *Futurism*. Where could they have put the *Tate Thames Dig*, a piece so special as to be on permanent exhibition, a piece so special as to be commissioned for the museum’s very opening and, sharing in its birth, will therefore forever be intimately bound with it. *Horror* at the prospect and near *panic* at the reality of the words I was hearing, as I stood at the information desk in Turbine Hall, as the man behind the counter *typed-typed-typed* to find an answer. “Oh, yes, that piece. I don’t think it’s been on display for a couple of years now.” Horror as I wandered back through the halls of the museum, stunned, wondering what I would tell everyone, how I could admit my utter foolishness. But I *know* it said “on permanent exhibition”! Or did it just say “in the permanent collection”? No.... What would I tell everyone? I started practicing my response: “Oh, it was *amazing* to see it in person! Reading about it could

never begin to do it justice. To open the drawers and rummage through all those lost little pieces of everyday lives—oh, it's *sublime!*" Yes, that's what I'll tell everyone when they ask, when I have to stand up in front of the Kenner family and give a talk about my project and all the good their money has come to.... At least there was still the *Futurism* exhibition.

"No. I have to see that piece," I said to the man behind the counter when I went back, having wandered the halls in a state of utter disbelief, veritably *floated* through the halls, stunned. "I've come all the way from America, on a grant, just to see *this one piece*. I know it's in the permanent collection, it was commissioned for the opening of the Modern—it's got to be here somewhere! Is it stored in the building? Is it in a basement somewhere? Can I just go see it, just for ten minutes—five—I just need to look at it, to have actually laid eyes on it. You can have someone watch me the whole time—I just need to see it—*please*." I was trying desperately to reveal just enough of my desperation to illicit pity while veiling the bulk of it with what charm I could muster to prevent myself from seeming crazy or becoming either angrily reviling or sadly revolting.

"That might be possible with paintings," he generously offered, "but installations are usually dismantled." Sinking, sinking....

"Could it possibly be on exhibit somewhere else?" I suddenly had nightmarish thoughts of it being in Chicago, or L.A.—or Bloomington—on exhibit in the U.S. until

the day after I left London, going back on exhibit at the Tate the following week. "Even just anywhere in Europe?"

"Come to think of it...let me just check something." *Type-type-type-type-type-type.*

Pause. *Type-type-type.* "Yes, it's over at the Tate Britain just now. It opened yesterday."

You say water is troubled or calm.

You say water is disturbed.

You say water is soft and hard.

You say water is foul.

You say water is fresh.

You say water is limpid and languorous.

You say water is sweet.

CHAPTER 6

CABINETS OF RECOVERED WONDER(S): MARK DION'S DIGS

Cabinet of the Air

The art collection offered a “stage” on which art itself ... was performed by way of exhibition. In this sense, the local art collection was itself a microcosm, a world gathered into one place, where art itself, in its visible manifestation, initiated the public into its mysteries. (Belting 23)

But the castle of culture has now become a museum in which, on the one hand, the wealth of the past, in which man can in no way recognize himself, is accumulated to be offered to the aesthetic enjoyment of the members of the community, and, on the other, this enjoyment is possible only through the alienation that deprives it of its immediate meaning and of its poietic capacity to open its space to man's action and knowledge. (Agamben 111)

The intention of the collector is to create a complete alternative world in the area of his specialization, which supplies him with substitutes for all the pleasures of

the real world. His passion has become displaced from people onto things, the gathering of which signifies psychological fulfillment. He strips the things of their exchange or use function and attempts to reproduce them in accord with his own private order. The single missing item [the final signifier of his universe, always on the verge of meaning-completion] is so valuable in this enterprise that all of the other objects in his collection, in comparison with this last, missing one, lose their value

The chaos of this collection is precisely what frees the imagination. The ecstasy combines the objects in such a way they appear as “a poem without end” [Balzac, “The Wild Ass’s Skin”]. This infinite poetic process distinguishes antiques from the inventory of things in a museum (Asendorf 52, 53)

The collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection’s world.

... The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art, its function is not the restoration of context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life. ...

While the point of the souvenir may be remembering, or at least the invention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting — starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie. (Stewart *On Longing* 151)

My point about spiral repetition is that sometimes that-which-repeats-itself also *transforms* itself. Because each iteration occurs in an absolutely unique context, each turn of the spiral enters into a new and distinctive assemblage — with the absolutely local chirps, odors, herbs, thoughts, whirs, images, breezes, light waves, viruses, animals, machines, and minerals in its milieu. ... Spiral repetitions are not best understood as parts of a larger, designed “matrix” (Paracelsus) but can be accidents that give birth to wondrous and unsettling — enchanting — new forms. ... In this image, fortuity, contingency, and chance — like will, design, and intent — can repeat and enchant. (Bennett 40)

[A] goodly, huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever Nature has wrought in things that want life and may be kept; shall be sorted and included. (Sir Francis Bacon, qtd in Reed, back cover)

At the very borderline between sensation and thought is wonder. ... The feeling of wonder, where and when it surprises us, alerts us to a highly personal boundary of intelligibility that is unique to each person: "the place where at this moment in our own history and development we are able to see a question. ... [W]onder is an ethical imperative; it is the quality of experience that prompts us toward an intensive engagement of the world[.]" (Grynsztejn 27)

Cabinet of the Terrestrial Realm

Mark Dion is an artist of international reputation and great ambition. His work consists mainly of large installation projects which take teams of people and months of work to construct. His work has been described as archeological or archival, often entailing aspects of the collection. Along with *Tate Thames Dig*, a short list of some of the titles of Dion's works indicates a good deal about it.

- *Raiding Neptune's Vault, Treasure Chest (Relics and Antiquities)*
- *Department of Tropical Nature*
- *A Meter of Jungle*
- *Frankenstein in the Age of Biotechnology*
- *Toys 'R' Us (When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth)*
- *Extinction Series (Black Rhino with Head)*

- *Collectors Collected*
- *Concrete Jungle (The Mammals)*
- *On Tropical Nature*
- *The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group*
- *New York State Bureau of Tropical Conservation*
- *A Tale of Two Seas: An Account of Stephan Dillemuth's and Mark Dion's Journey Along the Shores of the North Sea and Baltic Sea and What They Found There*

Dion's work is concerned with history, both natural and cultural, with exploding the opposition between the two, and with the production of knowledge. His works often take the form of collections, "deftly appropriat[ing] scientific modes of investigation and display in order to deconstruct them. Nevertheless, he maintains a real affection for the processes of collecting and discovery, and is sensitive to the aesthetic and fantastic qualities that attract us to such displays" (International Center of Photography).

His work has been associated with "institution critique" art, but his relation to the museum, the collection and archive, as to science and Enlightenment ideals of rationality, is ambivalent and complex, and does not fall easily into any category, be that of an unabashed positivist, a purely critical poststructuralist (he has been influenced by Foucault, among others), or romantic naturalist and ecological artist-activist. He indeed has proclaimed his love for scientific discovery and classification, a broad field of inquiry that many of his works not only literally put on exhibit, but

incorporate into their process of construction. Dion and his team of students, hired assistants, and volunteers will often spend weeks collecting and classifying materials, for instance.

These same installations, however, often underscore the harm to our natural environment that our historically exploitative attitude of dominion and mastery has produced, grounded in part in those very same Enlightenment ideals of the absolute superiority of Reason that subtend the scientific method of experimentation and classification. His work also references the dynamics of power-knowledge and of its production of human subjectivity and our relation to the natural world as forces that shape and shift that world through our activity and interactions with it—our interactivations with/in it, to use the phrasing I use with the aesthetic experience of art works. Dion is very aware of the way in which we construct our world and identity, and of the way constative description or classification is often if not always also a performative materialization (to some immeasurable degree) of the very thing we purport to “discover.”

To begin to take a closer look at his work, it seems appropriate to begin with the two versions of his *Cabinet of Curiosities*, one of which was installed at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in 1997 (see figure 7), and its recreation was housed at the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis in 2001. In each iteration, the cabinets were constructed to approximate authentic

Wunderkammern and then filled by Curatorial Studies graduate students with objects taken from a variety of the universities' private collections, including such items as

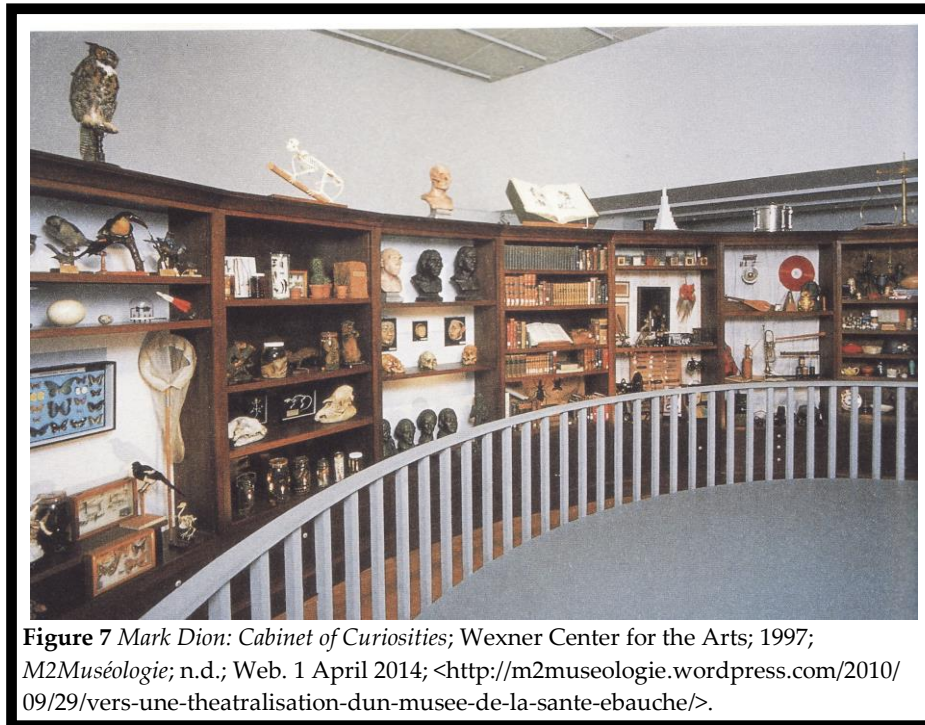


Figure 7 Mark Dion: *Cabinet of Curiosities*; Wexner Center for the Arts; 1997; *M2Muséologie*; n.d.; Web. 1 April 2014; <<http://m2museologie.wordpress.com/2010/09/29/vers-une-theatralisation-dun-musee-de-la-sante-ebauche/>>.

musical
instruments, clocks,
biological
specimens, textiles,
a Korean mask, a
model of the human
eye, a stuffed
peacock, a pen used
by Lyndon Johnson

to sign the Food Stamp Act of 1964, and various manuscripts. Dion chose the names of the cabinets, which would delineate their contents according to each student's associations with the titles, such as, "Cabinet of the Sea" and "Cabinet of Knowledge."¹³

One of the effects of a project that brings the cabinet of curiosity into the museum space on a university campus is to make visible the intersections of these very institutions. "Indeed," writes E. Bruce Robertson in his essay for the exhibition catalog, and as I have earlier underscored, "the curiosity cabinet stands as a direct and intimate ancestor to both the museum and the university" (43). All three involve modes of

¹³ From which I take my section titles for this essay. See Sheehy 69-80 for the complete list.

classification and the development of bodies of knowledge. If the *Wunderkammer* illustrates for Shiner and Agamben that the fine arts have not yet been established as their own separate disciplines apart from sciences, rhetoric and logic, history, etc. as of the sixteenth century, the key word is, of course, *yet*. The university itself might accurately be termed a specialization engine, and it, too, contributes to this extent to the alienating disjunction of modern experience, whose shadow falls far beyond the arts.

Another *Wunderkammer* project is *The Tate Thames Dig* (1999; see figures 8-11). The dig commenced after the Tate Modern commissioned Dion to complete a project for their opening, but before work on the building had yet begun, so that the dig was undertaken alongside the construction of the museum itself. The title registers the fact that the contents of this double-sided cabinet of curiosities were literally excavated from the banks of the Thames River, and articles from each side of the river were collected in two week-long excavations, and kept separate from beginning to end,



Figure 8. Mark Dion and crew scavenging for objects along the Thames; 1999; *The Warhol*; n.d. Web; 1 April 2014 <http://edu.warhol.org/app_dion.html>.



Figure 9. Objects being cleaned and sorted; 1999; Tate Modern; n.d. Web; 1 April 2014; <<http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/mark-dion-tate-thames-dig/the-dig/field-centre>>.

occupying their own side of the cabinet. At the end of the second dig, the team of over twenty volunteers meticulously cleaned and began the multiple-stage process of grouping and sub-grouping the thousands of items into ever more specific classifications. They found everything from “rusty keys, knives, and a baby shoe, to bullet shells, teeth, animal bones, broken pottery, glass, and toys” (Sheehy 4). Over the course of the several weeks of this process, Dion organized a series of public lectures and presentations on the subject of the Thames by scholars and artists from a number of different fields. The tents set up to shade their cleaning and classifying efforts were open for viewing to the public, as well, and people would often peruse the table of curiosities and engage the team with various questions about the items and/or project. As Sheehy points out, citing Dion’s lecture at the Weisman during the installation of *Cabinet of Curiosities*, Dion’s art consists of the process behind his installations as much as the final exhibits themselves. Commenting on *The Tate Thames Dig*, Dion said:

I think about this project consisting in three stages: the dig, the cleaning and preparation, and the exhibition in a cabinet. For me, they are all equally important. ... One way to describe this project is to say that it visualizes the entire process leading up to the final exhibition. (5)

It was not only in the process of collecting items for inclusion in the piece that both other workers and, through the lectures and their happenstance observations of the

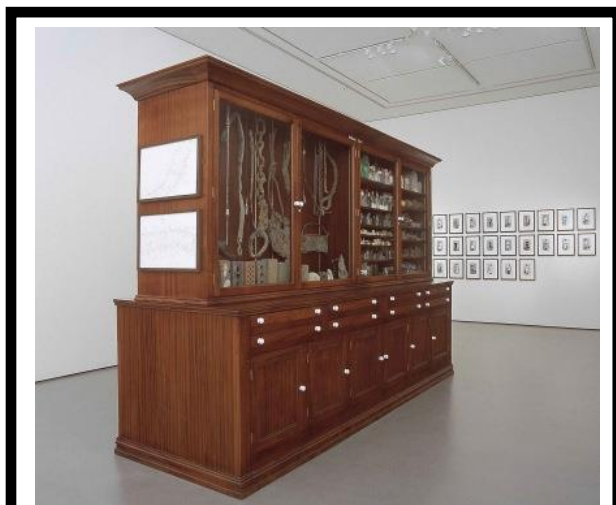


Figure 10. *The Tate Thames Dig* (installation view); Tate Modern; n.d. Web; 1 April 2014; <<http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/mark-dion-tate-thames-dig/the-dig/displaying-the-work>>.

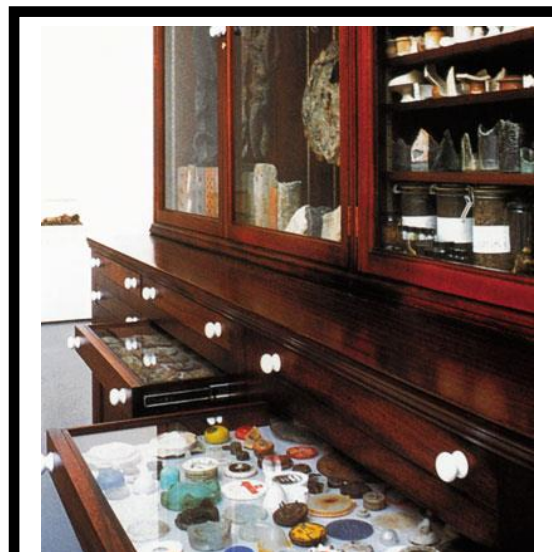


Figure 11. *Tate Thames Dig* (detail); *The Warhol*; n.d.; Web; 1 April 2014; <<http://www.warhol.org/education/resourceslessons/Mark-Dion/>>.

process, the larger public was involved in the work. The title itself, *The Tate Thames Dig*, indexes its own process and brings it fully into the fold of “the work,” the finished display cabinet, which is essentially interactive itself and near which is displayed a mesh metal locker containing some of the excavation equipment, a hat, jacket, digging tools, and books on archeology.

Cabinet of Humankind

In the permanent collection of the Tate Modern, viewers are allowed to break the taboo of not touching the art, encouraged to pull out the drawers to look at the variety of objects pulled from the muck of the river banks. *I look into the glass doors of the cabinet not sure if I can open them, then see someone else pull out a drawer. Oh, the drawers open! No, no, I*

knew this. I had read about this. I unfortunately read about it extensively before I ever got to see it, experience it, interact with it. I am that person pulling the drawers out, and he looks over at me for confirmation before doing the same. This offers viewers an investigative delight, as they survey the wide range of objects in the collection which together reveal much about our collective selves, and nothing of the nature of the Thames itself. We are what has been excavated in this dig, a project of cultural anthropology rather than geology. I open the doors to the top part and see the assortment of objects hanging in them. A rope, a tire, a length of chain. I look into the drawers and see the collections of objects and fragments of objects that gravitate around to one another in groups, like with like, just like with people. Who are these groupings, what are their bases? Blue. These blue stones, blue glass, these pale blue-patterned china bits. ID cards, credit cards, library cards. Handles broken off ceramic mugs. Eyeglasses. Bottle caps. Whole bottles and drinking glasses that have survived, somehow, intact. How did all these things come to be in or along the river? The wide assortment of objects attests loudly to the fact of environmental pollution, and signifies our own self-destructive impulses as much as the force of the great river, already associated so heavily with the large number of suicides known to have thrown into its darkness the absolute depths of their own. The bullet only underscores this association of human violence, of death and destruction at our own hands.

Viewers search, perhaps, to find some hint of cause or suggestion of cure for our civilization's discontents in this archive of them. They want an answer to the questions

this piece implicitly poses, and looks, with its rational organization, its logical presentation, to promise. They look in every drawer and on every shelf to find the last piece and complete the picture, only to find that if it exists, and if it is here in the cabinet and neither still on the banks of the Thames nor being pulled into its waters (as we slide open the last drawer), catching on a rock or sinking in the layers of earth beneath the currents, if it can be found at all then it is surely in one of the closed boxes in the bottom row of cabinets that sit there smugly sealed off from inspection. *I slide open the last drawer, not having yet opened the lower cabinet doors to see what I might find. I look around and the guard that stands at the threshold of this room and the next (where I will find Damien Hirst's similar collection, The Pharmacy, through which I'll run into The Chapman Family Collection I remember reading about) is squarely out of sight in the other gallery. I take pictures (on a borrowed cell phone from which, it turns out, I will not be able to extract the photos) of the contents of the drawers. I take pictures and ponder looking into the boxes below. Are they sealed? Could I get into them? The guard comes back around the corner and I move around to the other side.*

Cabinet of the Allegory of Vision

Built into Mark Dion's "Wunderkammer" installations is a sophisticated understanding of the historical and cultural contingency of the categories of classification that make up so many nodes of our cultural matrix by which various configurations of worlds or lives

are made visible to us as intelligible or possible realities, realities further qualified by judgment (desirable or undesirable, acceptable or unacceptable). These are the very matrices of intelligibility, the cultural codes, the forces of ideology and the discourses (take your theoretical pick) that shape and direct our lives to such a great extent without the very critical attitude Dion's work seeks to engender. Such forces are generally invisible to us without it, and all the more powerful for that; artist's like Dion and Eliasson want to make them seen alongside the possibilities for a different mode of being, a different structure of desire, a different formation of bodies and pleasures, conceptual frames and affects. Dion's aims, in his own words:

I want to create a situation in which the information I'm presenting is looked at critically—not taken for granted—and is examined with caution. There are people who read culture very cautiously and critically. That's a healthy way to approach the information that we're given every day ... I think that you can be critical of the way something is instrumentalized and at the same time still support the goals and motives of that field. Just because you are engaged with it in a critical way doesn't throw the whole thing out. I have a relationship to science as an ever-evolving way of thinking ... I think it's important that the category of nature is not something the field of science has a monopoly on, that everyone has a say in what gets to be nature at a particular time for a particular group of people. In order to motivate people to care about the natural world

around us, one of our chief tools is an aesthetic sensibility Even though I have a certain engagement with science, there are a lot of tools that the artist has that the scientist doesn't. Humor, irony, metaphor—these are the bread and butter of artists. And I think that's really what artists can add to a particular kind of struggle, that they have this expanded tool bag. (Dion, "Science")

Hand in hand with these elements of institution and larger cultural critique, an equally powerful and ultimately more important tool is these works' ability to enchant, to activate a wonder and enjoyment that takes the auditor beyond herself, outside herself, so that her "world comes alive as a collection of singularities," the objects' singularities and the singularities of the persons to whom they once belonged (Bennett 5). Dion's cabinets offer the auditor the opportunity to enjoy her own epistemophilia and to wonder (in that other sense of the word) about all those others to whom these fragments are connected, about the nature of our human culture and its effects on the natural world. Dion's collection in a sense presents by proxy a whole panoply of human lives, the details of which are lost to us, but whose presence is herein recognized. *The Tate Thames Dig* speaks of these others, calls them forth in their absence, speaks of this world we share, of the ways of life, the cultures, we create and share on a planet our presence has so dramatically impacted, from which perspective all of our great cities (London, Paris, Tokyo, New York City, Mexico City, Beijing...) are at best just rubble in the end, if not the source of great destruction. Dion's cabinets activate in us a critical

faculty that makes us aware of the construction of knowledge and the institutional forces at work in our society and it ignites us with wonder, enchanting us with its curiosities (which are ours), engaging our senses and curiosity about ourselves (collectively and individually) and our world. *Circling around and around this cabinet in my slow trawl through its layers of cultural discharge, I can't help wonder how all of this stuff ended up in and along the river. I wonder about all of the people once connected to it. How long have these things been lost or tossed away? Some of the ID cards are fairly recent to the 1999 excavation. Some of the objects seem like the water has been wearing them down for a long time, but how fast might that happen? Who were these people, and how did anything that belonged to them end up in the Thames? Did they all just make the trek to the river just to throw these things in? Some things might fall, slip out of the hand, as one walked over this bridge or that. While walking over one bridge or another, the river might serve as a convenient dump. But how did those shoes get in there? Those phones? Those children's toys? Who wrote that note? Did any of these people die in that river? How many have died since? Are any of them here? I feel a keen sense of their presence somewhere, a keen sense of their, my, our inevitable absence and all of human civilization just rubbish left behind, just so much scar tissue on the surface of the planet. The Tate Thames Dig activates our enjoyment of inquiry, the inquiry that opens possibility rather than closes it (like so many answers so absolutely sure of their authority), and offers us a sense of those we will never meet, recognizes their presence somewhere nearby at some point, a connection in our absence from them to all of our*

fellow humans, all with the same fundamental potential, all struggling to make a life for themselves within parameters set by their chance circumstances (one of the great pathos of the museum); our basic human disconnection in a world of conflict and mistrust, violence and that extreme disparity of resources which the two sides of *The Tate Thames Dig* cabinet, split one from the other, embodies. *Feathers, seeds, fish, and mollusks of five varieties. Various bones. A radio. A little green alien figurine with eyes and mouth frozen open with awe at all this, opened in wonder or opened to protest, or to question, inquire, to find out or to relay some significant bit of knowledge we cannot yet fathom, or simply to hold, in that moment of infinity in its state of stasis, a note of joy, enchanted and en-chanting*¹⁴. *Gloves, belts, shoes. Pieces of silverware. A note, taken from a sealed bottle, unharmed and legible, handwritten in all caps and reading,*

WHAT ADAY WHAT A WORLD

I WISH I COULD JUST FLOW

FLOW WITH RIVER THAMES

PUT THE DAY BEHIND

ONTO THE OCEANS OF MISTRY

AND BE, WHAT I CANNOT BE,

HOPE IS MY ONLY HOPE

THAT ONE DAY A TREADE THE

¹⁴ "One also notes that the word *enchant* is linked to the French verb *to sing: chanter*. To en-chant, to surround with song or incantation[...]" (Bennett 6).

WATERS

A DEU

JARVISON@MSN.COM

IF YOU FIND THIS MESSAGE

YOU ARE A FRIEND INDEED

AND YOUR ARE ASOVIOUR

FROM

THE DEEPS

Such a work incites the viewer's desire and gets her running after herself as situated in a world, after a world in which she could situate herself (isn't this what Agamben says we can no longer do?). This is the joy of discovery and "curiosity" that is original to such art works, of enchantment or wonder. It matters forth with its musical force that "moment in our own history and development [when] we are able to see a question" (Grynsztejn 27). Dion's collections in his "wonder cabinet" installations pose the very question of our *poietic* being in a shared world, of what we are or are not doing with our capacities and creative potential, with that fundamental capacity, and what the impact of our actions on others and the natural world may be. It asks what kind of world it is we are making, in our current historical moment, in the interactivations of it that fully materialize it as a lived world just as our interactivations of art works

constitute them as art works-cum-aesthetic experiences. “I’m trying to motivate through a sense of the marvelous, through a sense of the wonderful” (Dion, “Ecology”).

Wonder and enchantment open for us the question of our world and of our being with/in the world. The question is the very mark and initiation of desire. This questioning in wonder opens our reflective capacities and therefore the possibility of any kind of conscious agency, any ability to see and choose between alternate possibilities for action, any kind of interactivation in and of the world, of various possibilities for how we might live. This is the wondrous possibility, the ethical relation that art, as bearer of the fundamental question of being, can transmit. In our moment, now, it may be that the question, not the shared answer or “meaning,” and the trajectory of desire which is our pursuit of it—it may be that beyond critique a pursuit and sustenance of enchantment, of wonder, is the only possible way to begin to inhabit differently—more productively and *poietically*—that split which Agamben rightly claims cannot be repaired (and was there really ever any paradise to regain? Is this a fantasy of origins that is itself a function of the fundamental split of the signifying animal?). It may be that the question opens a less destructive, less alienated and alienating, and more ethical *poietic* interactivity of human with human with/in the world.

Cabinet of the Underworld

In activating both critique and wonder, Dion's (and Eliasson's) installations might constitute "texts" of both of the pleasures Barthes distinguishes, that of *plaisir*, on one hand, "the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked with a comfortable practice of reading." On the other is the text of *jouissance* that "imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts ..., unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation to language" (*Pleasure* 14). In such works we find both the familiar and the uncanny, our familiar and unfamiliar selves, reassured of our place and cast—for a moment beyond minutes—hopelessly beyond the pale.

Mark Dion's collections are very much like collages, recontextualized bits of the world we interactivate in our materializing perceptual, affective, and signifying intercourse with it, presented so as to clean and clear the way for opening differently onto the world, for reflecting differently upon our individual and collective selves, to possibly break with the materialization, our inhabitation and reiteration of old habits, of limiting and destructive ways of living, to inhabit the split of the cultural animal's being (if only slightly) (but still significantly) differently.

Poet Rosmarie Waldrop, thinking about her writing process of literary collage, writes, "I turned to collage very early, to get away from writing poems about my

overwhelming mother” (211). She had read Tristan Tzara’s instructions for “cut-up” and decided to try it. In the results she could still see the muted traces of her mother in the poems, but side by side with so much else, some of it surprising, something of herself she may not have caught on to or up to otherwise, that “stranger within,” as Chaouli puts it. She quotes the last line of Tzara’s instructions: “The poem will resemble you” (173). But, as the collage process teaches us, as Dion’s cabinets may make clear, in that light in which Eliasson’s works bathe us—you may not fully recognize this “you.” Perhaps, even, you will have come back from this far off territory, from your traversal through the field of the Other—other artist, other language, other text, other subject—having encountered the other without and stranger with/in the world worlding forth with/out us; encountered that which is in you more than you, and in encountering it are left dripping with its darkness and almost imperceptibly, if significantly, different from exposure to it.

* * *

For exposure names that way of being in which I put myself into a position such that I can be affected in ways I cannot fathom. (Chaouli 333)

You have to trust the things you can't name. You feel through your body, you take in the world through your skin. (Ann Hamilton, qtd in Wachtmeister 121)

The unknown is where I want to be. (Roni Horn, qtd in Sollins 6)

CHAPTER 7

WHAT OR WHETHER ART ENCOUNTERS, WHAT DARK BLISS

Art is always an intimate experience, even as rain or ocean or river. Art is always an intimate experience; you can't separate yourself from it. Art is always a personal experience; your relationship to art is your relationship to yourself. You say art is troubled or calm. You say art is rough and restless. You say art is disturbed. You say art is quiet, art is serene, and sometimes clear. It might be pure, and then it is brilliant. Art is heavy, that's a fact. Art is often tranquil, even placid. Art is still, and then it might be deep as well. Art is cold or hot, chilly or tepid. You say art is brash or brisk, sometimes crisp. You say art is soft and hard. You say art irritates and lubricates. You say art is foul. You say art is fresh. You say art is limpid and languorous. You say art is sweet. The opacity of the world dissipates in art. Black art cannot dissipate the opacity of the world. When you see yourself reflected in art, do you recognize the art in you? What is the darkness in the art? Is it you?¹⁵

¹⁵ This reiterates the earlier excerpt of Roni Horn's *Saying Water* installation, but with a difference: I have replaced every iteration of the word "water" with "art."

CHAPTER 8

IT'S NOT THE FLOWERS IT'S THE SUN (WHAT WORLD MOST VIVIDLY WITH US)

How do you know you exist and what makes you doubt it?

“We mainly suppose the experiential quality to be an intrinsic quality of the physical object’ —this is the so-called systematic illusion of color. Perhaps it is also that of love.

But I am not willing to go there—not just yet. I believed in you.”

(Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* 20-21)

How did you know you were in love and what makes you unsure of it?

The moment the strongest

he was born the moment

the strongest rush of love I have ever felt. *No questions*

no question just the surety of falling

falling down a waterfall standing

immersed there in the foaming water, the waterfall

cascading down battering head torso thighs—

upturned face blinded

by water and sun—

its power enveloping

enveloping and violent in its joy.

How do you know you're in love?

Asking how you know you know how

how you love you know you love is asking

how you love you know how

how you know a hammer hits

a hammer hits you

it's a fact

a fact it's maybe just infatuation—maybe—just

a fantasy—what matter—what

matter does—it make—matter does it

make matter does it—make it

Where do you come from and why do you care?

The nurse, my mother

My paternal grandmother

said, announced that

Africa. All of us Africa, I'm told

grandmother's family ran a pub (and did some

from the look of me

St. Thomas's Hospital

smuggling on the side) in Algerkirk

I would be either

South London

England until 1907 when

a professor or

Vauxhall fitted me out with consciousness

as a child she

a clergyman. I was told that

shades of the prison house

my grandmother and her family

so often that

Back two on one side, Sussex

came to Oklahoma, God knows why

it has struck has stuck as has

Back two more, SW Cornwall,

My paternal grandfather an orphan in Montana

the memory of upsetting her

near Falmouth

Swiss, according to the orphanage records, he looked

I said to her

Back two on the other, Co Kildare, and Scilly

American Indian, as do I

a teenager I said it

Scilly, 1750, I trace my origins to Scilly

a preposterous thing

Sunday 20th February 1949 5:45 a.m. local time,

to say the nurse undoubtedly said it

London

to everyone

said one of a set of

such things

Why don't you listen to what the universe or your mind or your body or your god whispers ever more closely?

I remind myself, I try to, every day, over and over, with many actions, with many thoughts, to do just that.

I listen to my body
intermittently I observe
the universe more
than listen.

I know what it says.

I listen intently.

The messages are contradictory.

Once you listen there is immediately more.

I know it says

what it says

know what

I don't like

the implications.

It might be right.

To the wind to the waves the song constantly touches shore.

Sure sign of delusion.

What are the parameters of your small world?

Days, most days. A small comfortable room.

Charts and notes, computer screens with color-coded grids.

A vocation made of words.

A house in the suburbs backed up to a creek.

A quiet husband and a cat with eighteen toes.

Pills before meals.

Books and notebooks stacked by my favorite chair, my bed.

Often, prayers for bravery.

I restrict my world

my world, what I do well. I feel the walls

hardening.

Physically, the parameters of a one-year-old child

my world defined by a one-year-old child.

Philosophically, none.

What, if anything, do you do to enlarge it? If nothing, why not?

Art is an enlarger *enlarges* enlarge me.

Art is an enlarger but I don't have a lot

I don't have a lot of time.

I guess I write to keep the walls from closing in.

I try to engage with strangers.

I try to make new friends.

I try to remember, in a way that is energizing and not terrifying, that I will die.

I try to maintain authentic relationships with a few people, but oh god people are just so disappointing and self-serving.

I see it *see it in myself.* It's exhausting.

So I have crazy enthusiasms

tv shows

authors

musicians

mini-crushes on new experiences. Something to give me hope, to give me get me out.

What value does art have in your life?

I stand in the National Gallery in London in June in 2009, confirmed in my conviction. I have never understood the popular appeal of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. The popular appeal of the merely pretty, I suppose, but they aren't really that. I circle around the room around the other paintings. I don't remember which now. Maybe a Matisse, a Monet or Manet. A Cézanne, I hope; I love late Cézanne landscapes. And I turn from the muted pixilations of the world set before me, turn around (you've seen this scene in the movies) and there it is, at the center, glimmering from all around their scraggly heads, from all behind what I had only grazed my eyes over. It's not the putative subject of the painting but the background.

It's not the flowers; it's the sun that fills the space between.

The yellowgold wall bleeding forth from between the browning buds, submerging the frame behind its thickening presence, its illusion of purity, of justness beyond judgment, appearing for the first time in the moment in which it precipitates your perception of it. No photo could have transmitted this searing insistence. Maybe this was why Olafur Eliasson placed a sun in the Tate Modern? To insist on our presence in it. Our perception the contingent element in the presence of what we call, so abstractly, the world, the climates of stairwells, the pinging attention of too-bright office hallways, a day breaking infinitely with updates—the very latest twittering leaflet to turn face, to fall; the night-swelling banks of skyline along the highway you never tire of but want to erase of signs.

When we imagine the world without us, we imagine it still

as we would see it, viewed from the top of the tower, the peak of the mountain, from the edge of the precipice, flying over the flock over the waves over the crushing rocks: taking it in one last time: one last survivor. There is no us without it. It courses through whatever perceives anything at all, connective: tissue of all seeing things seen, all

feeling things felt, carried over into whatever binds us: together against the prowling Inevitability. Inevitably, we think. We know this. When we're told to.

What does art bear?

We can't deal *deal with it* deal with complexity, the intensity of reality *we simplify*. We assign simplified symbols to all aspects of it and manipulate them.

We categorize and pigeonhole.

We take the ridiculous *the ridiculously simplified* symbols to be reality. This emotionally distances us *this distance we can bear* we bear to make our way.

Makes us little makes us a little dead inside.

Art tries to make us experience reality instead of the symbols. *It has to do this* It has to do this with implication, making us experience things vicariously. *Direct statements don't touch*. Direct statements just become sterile symbols that don't touch us directly.

Why don't you listen to what the universe or your mind or your body or your art whispers ever more closely to you?

There is much I don't like about it. This question. This question immediately engages me, on first reading, there is much.

It pulls at me, suggests intimate communion, response. Something other, a wellspring potentially, and truly behaved.

But the question embodies all sorts of assumptions that don't always apply.

Because it is difficult to trust, especially what appears to be good or benevolent.

What makes you think I don't?

I do, somewhat.

I listen most to my mind and then sometimes my body and sometimes the universe.

I keep trying. Sometimes a person learns by fucking up. Maybe the missed signs and signals on small things are helping me fine-tune my reactions and my trust, so I can catch the signs on important matters.

This is the question that most immediately engaged me on first reading, even though there is much I don't like about it.

Embodies all sorts of assumptions that don't apply.

Hearing (or is it listening) is crucial is related to our belonging our being.

It pulls at me, intimate with something

It pulls at me it suggests

intimate communion with something other than

habituated structures of response, as a wellspring of

All sorts of assumptions.

renewal, and potentially more meaningful or true experience and behavior.

Can art undo the violence of habit, resurrect the dead soul?

On my way back from London, I stay in New York a few days before heading to Providence. I am going to teach a summer class. I'm going to teach high school students about writing and art. I'm going to try to help high school students experience art and stop solving it like an equation. Let $X=X$. I'm going try to ease them or shock them into participating in its presence so they can make it themselves. But first there's New York, the Francis Bacon retrospective at the Met.

I spend a good two or three hours with the paintings, leering at every one of them (and glancing here and there at the hot boys who pass too quickly by). I feel the absence, feel almost angry at the loss of *Two Men on a Bed*, one of his most erotic paintings ("brutally," you want to qualify). Nor do they have the *Man at Curtain*, nor the *Study of the Human Body* I dream of putting on a book. I don't know yet to miss the steel blue ice-gray glow of the *Two Figures at a Window* that, from my bookshelf, tints the room I write this in. It does, of course, include the Met's own *Head I*, one of the earliest paintings, the earliest *Head*, early 1948, which I have stared at many times at length (unable to extract my small face floating in its glass), convinced: it's some substrate struggling into

subject, un-minded forces, half-dispersed, desiring at Being-One while wanting of form, willing itself from a substanceless matter into a world without. *Self*, if “subject” strikes you wrong.

Whatever either is (it is not *I*). Head half on, ill-formed, flesh a mottled gray matter, eyes swollen-shut or glazed over, embryonic, face all mouth, round mouth with four fangs angling each other. Mouth a clot of blood inside, muscling toward a moan. Staring at me staring at the painting, trying to shut out my face behind the shine-bearing wall put between us to protect us, one from the other. Staring. At times almost to tears. Hold back in fear. Hold back or bleed the bruising pigment. Once a small almost-sob escaped, a sigh, a quick-intake and repudiation of breath. An eruption of something the glass had no will or way to stave.

What dream do you remember, what message does it bear?

I was four in a school bus in my dream. In my dream I went into the small pocket of my school backpack, was transported into the pocket of my school bag, tried to enter a public restroom.

We are small we are smaller than we think.

What does art do what value?

No value (Adorno, Emerson, Buddha...). Its value is having
no value in a world devalued commercially *all value*
compromised

No more value than a single pea to a starving mother

Art enlarges

The possibilities of meanings

The meaning of possibility

The mechanism of perception

It recalibrates perception

It soothes

It questions

It screams It informs It repels It—It It

calms It

All art is quite useless (Oscar Wilde)

Why don't you listen?

Listen. Listen, I listen. I'm not one

only one person. All humans

a group. I am

a group of

competing factions.

One. Usually one wants

the one that wants

immediate gratification

wins. It has won it wants

want, it wants it it has it, has

toyed with has destroyed my life.

What does art make of you, what do you bear?

I leave the Met and find the little shop nearby where I've had lunch before. I need a break from Bacon, then I'm back. I go visit Picasso's Stein, see if I can find a Rothko to float on, to sink into as so much sun, to rinse off with. I turn the corner and stop dead in a start:

The shark:

the mouth: gape-eyed
and leering at me leering,
its prey. Glass
cannot protect you from
the gaze: the mouth. That mouth
that blazes
black

sun, this
shark's
dead eyes
defer to it, full-throated
void, it calls,
and closer. This
shark. It could
only be this shark, this
second shark, a shark
just like it, but not
the original. It could only be
this museum, the Met, or a museum
just like it. Like heaven, *The Physical*
Impossibility of heaven, the imperceptible Death
in the Mind of the perceptibility of Someone
Living (originally executed in 1991,
shark replaced
in 2006), 2009 now and white clouds its expressions
expressed gases floating
above it some sun

behind those reflections within reflections the glass tank sails off into
the glass walls of that side of this gallery in the Met. The shark's
replicas replicate
an intimation of infinity over the city. So peaceful, this
mouth-
like Bacon scream hovering in its sea-
blue tankful of formaldehyde. Surprisingly beautiful (what *beautiful*
means) to be stricken to be

taken. Thought from

the first it was the worst hoax. Seeing
images of it differently installed (was it the first
shark, the closed-mouth?), reading
about it, about Hirst's other
works, the bifurcated cows, I thought it must be
the most inert of conceptual gestures. I thought it

until I saw it, installed to eternally return in the glass wall
of that particular room

in the Met. The lights

illuminating the sea it soared unswimming in, engorged and gorgeously eerie

glow. That crowned void, its pillowed palate,

itching to swallow whole my very sight

my slight frame, everyone in the museum, every single thing and its inside

outwarding thingness in

the world. I sit with it

for a long time.

I sit with it in its near-stasis.

Sit with its ellipses in the window over the street,

the buildings, the sky. Circle around it and around. Sit.

Until out of nowhere

out of nothing *The Museum is*

closing in

fifteen minutes.

So long the guards have forgotten about me, afford me my own illicit pictures of it,
afford me a certain inconsequential glee in taking something of it with me. (Something
other than the photos I never look at now, it turns out; look at them now so wanting.)
On my slow walk out, I pass back through the Bacons, through the last of the crowd,
room by room, mouth by mouth towards the exit—a certain exhilaration—the
circulation of the substanceless substances that compose and decompose me *recompose*
through me throw me through the mouth of it into the world-rivering a bit further down
now the teeth in my back the snaring marks the bracketing quotations lighter now
around the world around me somehow it's more real, this illusion and only exhalation
of the remains of the unknown. What else

does *beautiful* mean

except unnerving or innervating or—
vacating—

(*blis iss lipsis is*) I once
wrote. *Mere pleasure binds us*

together the same, Barthes whispers
behind me, *and listen to us again...*

(Again, please)...*and bliss*

undoes us again

What, ever more closely to you?

today is not a day

today is not not

a day for self today

is not a day for self-flagellation

*What's the question again? Have you been disappointed? What's the value of art? What
composes a life? Why listen to? What most?*

Although the subtractions may accrete

accrete quickly

and with ferocity

accrete and congeal

never

(one never has)

never has nothing.

If the light if the air if the month of March

March in Louisiana is not enough,

or October in Georgia or June in Rhode Island,

if September is not enough,

the porch view merely pretty

(not even that);

if you've been schooled out

of loving to read; if because the Mets

(opera and museum)

are in New York

and you are not,

because the consolations of art are compromised

by your lack

of common joys

and the internet doesn't answer your call;

if your personal involvements in the world of
politics feel hollow; if you feel too hollow
for such involvements, the politics
of your personal life too trying to try (I know

I know no one

no one understands),

if you do not feel

tied to the world (the privileged

disease), if the world lies

beyond redemption, and there is not enough

vodka

(no tonic)

no tonic for all the hours of the night, the days

all the days of your ever shorter life—

there may remain still

(still, the voices)

the voices

cracked

as some may be, far past

their primes, their wobbly tops, the voices maybe one

still keen enough to cut straight through—

to empty you out

with as much ferocity as

mercy

grace

of the double negative—

not not,

unless you've lost your ear for it—

then nothing then

whatever thing besides

nothing

most vividly abides

then find or found what music

whatever music feeds

what most vividly abides in you

like memory like dreams

what music

whatever music feeds it

feeds on.

CHAPTER 9

FITTED OUT WITH CONSCIOUSNESS (WHAT MOST VIVIDLY VOICES)

What dream do you remember most vividly and what message does it bear?

Walking around downtown pregnant people
coming up to me smiling people I know coming up touching
the baby through my belly. The sun is warm.

From what or where or whom do you come?

From Carolyn Lee

From Mary Lee (d. 1945 of tuberculosis) and Marion Owen

From Daniel and Kitty, from Mary Irena and Mason Owen (dead after a box fell
a boxcar overturned and he fell
into alcoholism and abuse)

8:26am Thursday, November 8, 1973, Emory University Hospital, Atlanta

From Charles Frank

From Henry Frank ("HF"), who killed himself, and Sarah Emma Begemann

From Dee Edward and Nellie (née Yankee, who died of diabetes

when HF was eight) and from Joseph Andrew and Mary Lucy

Sunday 20th February 1949 5:45 a.m.

St. Thomas's Hospital in South London, Vauxhall

Where I was fitted out with conscience

12:20 pm in the UK Medical Center, Lexington, on the threshold

Capricorn shifting into

Aquarius separated

at birth fitted out

with consciousness

From what do you struggle to free yourself?

Fear Self Fear

Self-reliance Pride

Misery Misery from the other

Low self-confidence

Fear of change

Fear of failing

Jail Debt Doubt and anger Anxiety

Material goods

Bondage of self This material world

Why don't you listen to what the universe or your mind or your body or your god whispers ever more closely to you?

The whispers they whisper differently

no unity

all those voices. Sometimes the whispers
conflict.

My baby in my screaming my baby in my other my ear.

Maybe the conflict is actual
actually what I should think
should be
thinking about.

I assumed they were telling me
tell me what to do.

Maybe they're just giving me
give me
maybe they're just information. It's everywhere.

What to do. Maybe I don't like being told what to do
even gently.

I think about *should* a lot.

I'm afraid it's true.

Why do you

assume you assume

I don't?

Why don't you?

*

From where do you come?


Boulder, CO Vestal, NY Columbus, GA

Atlanta born and raised it's in the blood

The Blue Ridge Mountains

The laws of the universe

What are the parameters of your small world?

Dreams  Fears

There are no boundaries I only ~~you~~ only

The I confines

Genuine happiness and genuine love

There is no limit

There is nothing but limits through and against which
we must create attempt connections

Maybe *happiness* bears too many expectations *happiness* is inconstant.

People *inconstant* use it to designate what they don't yet have, what they are longing for, that which they have lost and want again. (Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*)

No four corners, no barriers, no limits. A whirlwind
of ambition and drive, a whirlwind of purpose and passion,
compassion,
of life and laughs.

Maybe *happiness* is the wrong word. *Happiness* as happenstance—a chance event going well for us—a lucky break (its older English meaning, Lear points out). Maybe *genuine*. Maybe *love*. Maybe words are the wrong medium.

Describe a person you love. How would you know them without their face?

Her voice anywhere anywhere
her smell. I would know her from her language and her laugh
her laugh and her way

the way her brain works.

And the boyish nape of his neck, back of his head,

his kissable ear

his fine, dark hair.

I love my mother. Her voice.

I would know her voice, the fast tumble of words. Even without words *discernible words*

I'd know her habit of little burrs between sentences, *mmms* and *errrs*,

tiny motors idling.

The ticklish bleat of his laugh? His radiant temperature? His lanky pranksterisms?

Did I mention she's funny?

What impossible gift would you give to whom?

Wisdom to all to open

Open-mindedness to all

When do you feel most alive?

At the beach hiking

hiking running swimming being

outdoors exploring the outdoors

biking and swimming

swimming in a cold stream swimming in the ocean

outside in nature running

running I feel uncaged

Traveling somewhere I've never been

Being in love

Having sex when I'm in love

When something is revealed and something is risked

Laughing with my friends

Onstage, acting or singing

Listening to Toto!

Playing music with others

When I'm dancing Something revealed

When I play guitar for people Something risked

But also really when I'm dancing

How do you make the world better for others?

Make music Make music and smash the state

Living selfishly

selflessly

Less self

Forgive them their missteps

What role does art play in your life?

I breathe. Art. I breathe. Life. My life. I breathe, expressing anything. Art a more beautiful way of communicating.

What do you hold onto or what won't let you go?

The meanness the meaninglessness of the world.

I want to make meaning in the world.

How did you first know you were in love and what makes you unsure of it?

Amazing sex. Sex

Love

is a funny thing. On and off like a lightswitch.

Off On Off On On On.

One night of good sex and nothing else matters.

What besides love do you doubt and what makes you doubt it?

I don't doubt it.

I doubt everything—I'm Catholic.

What darkness do you struggle to keep at bay?

Shame Negativity Others

Blaming others

Feeling looked down upon by others

chaos illness loneliness

Fear and Guilt Narcissism and creepiness

Chaos My mother, the devil

haunts my nights, Death haunts my nights

I love fashion art design I'm afraid I don't love people I don't know how to love.

I'm so scared. I'm sorry.

How did you first know you were in love?

I knew when I knew

a big fight

a big fight was coming

I decided not to

be afraid, to engage

I engaged with her in a fair fight, a loud

disagreement. I'm not good

at fights. But I'm starting to

value them.

He felt like a place I could pad around in bare feet in. (Sometimes)

Sometimes I feel most

I feel most honest when I am

I am utterly alone.

And what makes you unsure of it?

No doubts but love

grows changes love

over time. There are none

no guarantees.

I was never unsure of the love I felt.

There were times I was unsure *unsure of her* of her love

for me, but of my love for her *never*.

That certainty can make me restless.

How do you know?

I know him I know him his body the very image of him I know I want him his way the

way his body the very image behind my lids it pulls at mine this way inside my body

from inside my body his presence the very image of his absence pulls it almost through

me elsewhere wherever he is he is not here now the very image only the image of him.

Not here, and maybe not sniffing the air for me nearby, maybe perfectly anchored to the

space of his body his body inhabits. I will not let fear anchor me in mine, even if
indifference bars me, comes to pass his indifference bares me of his.

In what way have you been betrayed or disappointed?

On the losing side this side of compromise many
too many times.

I don't want to be a pointer a point
an appointer of things, but most things disappoint me.

In what way have you betrayed or disappointed yourself or others?

Tourists tourists disappoint me I disappoint myself as a tourist.

Sins of omission.

I have probably disappointed everyone who has ever known me.

In what way have you been disappointed?

Oh, Christ, Tod. You've met people, right?

CHAPTER 10

MAYBE THE EMPTINESS OF THE WORLD IS OURS (THE STARS POURING DOWN
ON US)

(for Billy in Providence, who always asks after my dreams)

What darkness holds on to you what won't you let go?

The world is meaningless *I want to create meaning.*

Maybe *meaning* is the wrong word

Maybe words

Maybe the emptiness of the world belongs to words

The world is full

The world is flat

The word flies round and round

Its dream of a language that can open the world

Open your eyes

What dream do you remember most vividly and what message does it bear?

I never remember my dreams.

The dream of my home, lights in the house.

The dream of watching from a tree the lights in the house in my childhood.

The dream of living in a tree in a tree in the woods.

On and Off and Off and On and On and Off.

High up in the tree, I grew rough skin, fur.

A dream of alienation, a dream of the strangeness of being.

Dream of adaption, adoption, a dream of adaptation.

Do you remember what message it bears?

I wake up and discover someone leaning over me, long knife
stabbing and slashing. The pain
is overwhelming.

Do you remember most vividly and what?

An evil man dressed like a TV bandit
a bandit in black-and-white stripes
a black mask
spreading oil on the stair landing outside my childhood bedroom.
This is the first dream.

What dream most?

I never remember my dreams.

Do you remember?

The one that came true
for someone else.

I never remember my dreams.

Blood soaking the sheets.

What dream what message?

A massacre

a serial killer

After a miscarriage

On a horse in a field, grass to the saddle.

Sun in my eyes, a mob grabbing at my clothes

pulls me off. A pack of wolves.

They cut his throat.

A pack of wolves. I wake up sweating.

Remember vividly?

I'm kissing the boy

I thought was the love of my life

until I met the love of my life.

Small stone in my mouth I don't want him to know.

What dream do you remember?

I am a young woman. I am a boy, a man. I am in a house, in the kitchen,
in a bedroom, a young woman. A boyfriend.

There is a boyfriend. A giant bed on which the boyfriend and I are kissing.

Between a girl and a boy. I begin to move

between a girl and a boy. I look up and across the room.

He wears the color of a clown, undulates more than dances.

I am in the kitchen, now the young woman's brother, with the boyfriend.

Everything is personal.

I never remember.

Most vividly bears what?

Many vivid and most of them suddenly upon me as the day
with its technicolor realism. The one most immediate
a repeating nightmare
when I was four or five or six months old, four or five years old, or six.
It made me terrified every night, every night sleepless.
I had to have light. Would lie awake
until my sister fell asleep, so she wouldn't notice me
turning on the lamp.

The vividness less visual, aural or
tactile: almost completely
feeling. The details simple:
a dark wood, black trees, inky sky.
The smell of wet dirt and damp mosses. I can't see
him or her but I know I'm being pursued and hunted and I am terrified.

The air ice in my throat, running
so long and hard I can't feel my legs anymore. It's terror I have never felt.

And every time,

just as I'm about to be caught,

I feel his

steps behind me the faint thump in the earth from his footfalls

and I wake.

What dream and what does it bear?

I never remember my dreams.

What do you most vividly and what?

A recurring dream a boy

a girl, slender with long blonde hair

floats like veils in the currents, caged

in a city beneath the sea

Night after night I return to this place

Night after night I swim to the girl. I know nothing

Night after night. She unbearably sad

Night after night I manage to free her. Night after night

After night she is caged again

What dream do you remember?

The Russians invading a beach near Savannah. Our home

underground tunnels. Lost from my mom, my brother

I saw shot.

Do you recall the parameters of your small world?

An elderly woodworker to my north, a school board building to the east,
to the south a woman who has spray-painted on her boarded-up windows,
“someone lives here,” and to the west a pagan
whose dogs climb her fence like children. The house and the children.

I’m afraid to venture out.

What dream?

I never remember my
remember my dreams more now,
as if waking into life
more fully somehow now,
as if

love

as if

because of

as if

art could

but no, but only

maybe only a heightened

satisfaction in

dissatisfaction

and through

a heightened possibility of—

but no, not only that—

what wind will come I feel— a definite shift

Why don't you ever remember your dreams?

A storm is coming.

A storm is coming to flood the world.

The storm is going to flood the world, the country, the county. Our town
will flood and we have to flee. The fear rising it's rising I'm alone
I'm alone and I can't find my cat.

The flood is coming and I can't find my cat, my pet, Penelope. My world
is flooding and I can't find my Penelope anywhere.

And what does it bear?

I find Penelope, and pick her up and hold her. She rubs her wet nose,
the side of her head, her ear; she rubs against my neck, my jawbone, my ear;
she rubs her head in the crook of my neck and shoulder.

I pick up Penelope and I hold her and pet her, and I realize that this is
not Penelope, not the real Penelope. I realize, or my
mother is there to tell me, there of a sudden to tell me that this is not the *real*
Penelope, the *true* Penelope, this is not the *original* Penelope
and there have been many (how many).

This is only the latest Penelope, only the one

I've had most recently and for an unknown number of years.

I don't remember the rest, can't recall that there were others, are others, out there
somewhere, but fully realize that this Penelope purring in my arms is not
my Penelope, the original Penelope. Where are they, where is she,
somewhere where they're safe?

Don't you remember?

I see a younger, smaller Penelope
scurrying along the side of the house,
mouse-hunting, but I find I care less for her,
feel no tug towards scooping her up.

How could there have been so many, how could there have been
any others?

My world is flooding, the fear rising, where are they where
could she be, is she

alright, is she waiting for me somewhere to find her, reclaim her,
my one true Penelope?

But don't I love *this* Penelope, hasn't *she* been my Penelope, this Penelope
nuzzling me now in my arms? So many parts apart from us, Penelope,
where are they all now and how many?

How many would I recognize or claim?

Are they scattered over the world, populating
only the cities where I have lived, or are they all here, in this place?

Are they scattered about or huddled together in dejection or
indifference to their fates?

Are they hungry or well fed, are they looked after or on their own,
where are they (which is she, my Penelope),
down in the basement or up in the attic, are they out in the fields
eating daisies and mice, back in the woods, up on the hills,
beneath the simmering stars, the quavering sun, the shadows, the shade
of others' porches, or gone?

What dreams now?

Where is she, my Penelope, the original, the true? And who is this Penelope,
here in my arms, purring as though she knew me,
as if to say she loved me and had been waiting for me to find her?

Or does she just want me to take her, to not leave her with the brood,
to save her from the flood, to feed her empty, flopping stomach, fear rising?

What dream most?

Penelope, oh, Penelope! Penelope my Penelope,
how could I have abandoned my Penelope so easily, left you for dead,
deeded you away to strangers, to the estranged world outside our door,
to your poor wits, the fates of chance and a bad world's whim?

Penelope, Penelope, which of you is Penelope, *my* Penelope,
the original, the true, and where? Is the original
even the true, or is this one in my arms, whom I've come to know but now
realize I only half recognize, *my* Penelope? My Penelope, tell me, where are you? Are
you in the basement, the attic, a neighbor's porch, a deserted park?
Are you under the spell of the stars, Penelope, the stars now pouring down on us
beneath the clashing moons of this strange place, Penelope,
flailing into the sea, falling into the trees, flooding it all, Penelope—
it's coming, I know, it's rising, Penelope my Penelope, my true—or are you
on the hills,
beneath the stars, in their sharpening
shadows, Penelope, those shadows the clouds dart over
the hills, or in the fields, Penelope—
in the clouds, or the mist, or the rain—or in the stars pummeling the earth—
the fire, Penelope—or in the plummeting in the roots that twist
ever more hungrily down?

Everything turned on its head, Penelope.

Every single thing falling up out of bed.

And what message does it bear?

This dream is about love.

This dream is about crime. Too much crime I dreamed

this dream because I've seen too much

I watch too many

crime shows, too

much CSI.

This dream is telling me to run or hold tight I can't tell.

This dream's about the big city.

Big Crime and Big Dreams in the Big City, of Art

in the Big City. London, New York, L.A., Miami. Caruso, O,

Caruso! I hear that voice now, luring my body back

out of its dark mine as I wake.

We are large perhaps larger in ways
larger in ways we think we're small.

If you are going to keep
(keep a secret) (a secret there)
there's a lot of work
ahead of you, people
people will find out anyway, sooner or later.

Dreams are not secrets or mysteries. Instead they are very
very simple. If I'm scared in the dream I am scared in real life.
If I need to pee in the dream I wake up and piss.

Run or hold tight I can't tell.

We are smaller than we think
We are smaller in the ways we think
We are large.

Then I actually wake up, screaming and sweating and crazed.

CHAPTER 11

THE WANT OF WATER (TO GIVE WHAT DIMENSION TO LIFE)

It hurts, this wanting to give a dimension
To life, when life is precisely that dimension.
We are creatures, therefore we walk and talk
And people come up to us, or listen
And then move away.

(John Ashbery, "Vaucason," *April Galleons*)

When do you feel most alive?

walking climbing hours

typing sewing concentrating

fantasizing

just thinking

the hands engage

their own activity

sewing

typing even

fantasizing about sewing or playing guitar,

even concentration,

playing

walking

even fantasizing

lost in

hours into the mountains

What are the parameters of your small world?

a tingling as if a limb

were just waking

up the edge of it

the edge of it where words break

words break down their hold

When do you feel most alive?

by the water

by the fire

in the garden

having sex

in the garden in the sun alone

in the shade

by the fire, stoked and raging, threatening

it will burn us down if we lose control

we try but can't

seem quite to shake it

in the water on the coast, sand shifting my feet, waves aggressively persuasive

in the garden alone

with my honey, my sweet

alone with my tea

by the fountain trickling

in the garden trees tricked-out gardenias wild in

wilding the air

reciting Stein like singing lights the lights on

round and round

Woolf throwing voices the wind caught on

reflections on

the want of water

Why do you feel so empty?

emptied out

the light

the trees

the sprawling expanse of trees this net of birch and beech,

that shagbark and oak, this elder elm greening

sun sifted through a stippling of leaves

thins too much for my vein-blue skin long light like hair

in the ocean calm

it is not bound it cannot hold it passes through

my blood chases fluttering folds of me fluttering

with my throat clambering for a note

to toss to the sky, as if

only if

it could slip through this house

has no doors, window blinds on

the outside so close

they open they close

on their own, continuously

aquarium gills

in the tall trees

breathing in

the distance

these oaks and birches, the elders that lord their reach over,

that do not allow me their sky, their trunks

are steeled. If I could reach them from my stilled husk to strike

I would

burn them down

in the garden, sun rays lifting the air, every line

of sight a flight elsewhere, a *bright otherwise here*

What dream do you bear?

my most vivid dream a teenager I looked just like

a woman's husband I knew

I was not as though I were

she acted as though I were her

husband as her husband

we spent ourselves we spent

an amazing day together at the end

before I woke up she looked in

into my eyes she smiled knew, she said

she said who I am I am I know *who you are*

and who you might be

How did you know you were in love?

not wanting

to disappoint her

And what makes you doubt it?

wanting taking others

What darkness almost overwhelms you and how do you keep it?

lust

breath and reconnection, a manifestation of grace

When do you feel most alive?

light flickering my head

flickering with the sun under the billowing

canopy fabric of leaves.

blue moon green night

puckered with stars a billowing

flag full of bullet holes I am

their reflection in the water some couple

happily along the bank tossing

their gazes

coins lost with the current

Some thing of me over the surface

some moments

before the moment of submergence.

rocking my baby girl to sleep.

What most vividly?

I want to *see the light*, I want to *light the way*, I want *lightning to strike*, to strike
the match, match flame with wick, with stick and arm, chair and leg, this base
board at my feet, window and casing, *a light in the window*, my hand gracing
the bannister as I ascend the stairs, lighting its length along the way. I don't feel
a thing, or I *feel alive*, am *carried away*.

What message does it bear?

not always the same way you river to me
can't always message the same message
twice the building changes as
you turn the corner the room you return to is not

How to give what?

how to live to learn

to live in the world

in a world not over

overwhelmed

by disappointment

What darkness almost?

my future scares me overwhelms me threatens

insecurity

all my life this

all my life will

I will never be

more than I am now

when I think what I had imagined

all goes black

but with the cat rearranging herself in my lap, with the light, so too the window
shifts

try calm

I try

to remember in a way that is calming

that I will die

always that, in one fashion or another, at the fringes of light and dark, at either
fringe that fraying, the light undoing of every dark cloth

meaning in the world I want

to make meaning in the world

must be made

When most how most what most vividly alive?

first plunge in hot springs

the act of composition

playing music for others making music with others

singing for the universe

when Keith Jarrett plays the Koln Concert

when I start to flirt with someone, *so free and sparkling* I could burst

when I'm alone, doing exactly what I want with *complete abandon*

carried across *The Waves*

on the back of a horse

when I have completely abandoned myself to reading *then suddenly notice*

when Thelonious Monk plays the first bars of "Bright Mississippi"

I never remember

my daughter's smile

I am deeply rooted in her when

my daughter smiles I am deeply rooted

when the Latihan begins

I try to remember

the silence after the poem ends

when I'm singing dancing making music

with words

when I'm belting a song

fresh vegetables roasted with rosemary

the *lilac*, the *linden*, the *jasmine*, the *lotus*

the first whiff of lavender

the first sip of matcha

when my dad laughs

first taste of Huarachito's fish taco

looking into the eyes of my beloved

when *totally enveloped in* Bach's cello suites, his fugues, Glass's *Metamorphoses*

carried across

rent through with Mattila's *Manon*, alone and lost to the dark sky

when I'm dancing only the music I am vibrating I am

somewhere between body and mind the open sky

singing to singing for singing with

what keeps in you more vividly than you

I never remember

what keeps

in me in you more vividly

than you in us

what abides between

in you in me what most what more what

whatever happens

ever more vividly

I try to remember to bear

ever more vividly

nothing abides *to abide in*

whatever happens by happens to be

what's most vividly here

what ever more vividly abides

what more

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