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# **The Singular Echo of the Artwork: Painting, Writing & OOO**

Fine Art Doctoral Thesis  
Michael Lawton  
University of Kent

Supervisor: Dr. S. Klee

Word Count: 39, 698

# Summary of Research Undertaken

## Research Methods

The research incorporates both practical and theoretical methods. The theoretical component of the research, (represented by this thesis,) was a philosophical investigation into Graham's Harman's OOO philosophy, applying it to spectatorship and art writing to frame the problem of the irreducibility of the literary and the visual, before extending it provide an alternative template for better art writing.

This philosophical thesis both provides support to and is supported by the practical research I have also undertaken. The practical component incorporates my creative practice as is, that is painting, writing and curating. These practical outcomes were both consequences of the research process and drivers of it.

## Research Outputs

This theoretical thesis is accompanied by three publications. *Stories for Paintings*; a collection of ten fictions written as part of this research. Two of the stories, *Morta Della* and *The Polycephalus* had their own specific supplementary publications that were also submitted for examination. Each of these supplementary publications were printed for two exhibitions that I organised to publish my research. One, *Cap Gros*, showed paintings made in response to the third object I formed with the Romanesque artwork of Catalunya. The other *AS I TOOK HER ARM SHE STARED THROUGH MY FACE AT THE DARK BRANCHES OF THE TREES OVER MY HEAD* I curated and organised to answer the following question; how do we paint about writing? I invited five other painters to make new work for the exhibition.

During the three years of doctoral research preceding my 'writing-up year' I made 73 paintings, thumbnails and further details of all of them are in Appendix Three of this thesis.

## Claims for Originality

I identify within the ever-changing and evolving philosophy of Harman his 'third object thesis', that directly pertains to spectatorship, and in which the artwork and viewer are indissociable, are joined in a third object, which must be written about instead of the artwork. This provides a new approach to the 'well-worn' problem of the irreducibility between the literary and the visual. This novel approach provides original insights into the problem and a template for working beyond it that utilises fiction, as I do in my Research Outputs.

In the course of this work I show that despite assumptions to the contrary, Harman's take on spectatorship is neither post-human, nor does it conform to other well recognised Modernist models.

This is the first thorough practical application of OOO to artistic practice, 'road-testing' its suitability as a tool for artists and art writers.

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## Appendix One

Further analysis of Harman and his influences

- i. Harman's Ontography
- ii. Van Gogh's shoes and The Origin of The Work of Art
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## Appendix Two

The Plant, the Wolf, the Great Aunt, a 'third object text' not included in the collection

## Appendix Three

Documentation of paintings made and exhibitions organised as part of the study.

Also included as part of this submission are three separate publications:

### **Stories for Paintings The Polycephalus Morta Della**

N.B. In this copy of the thesis, prepared for digital deposition, these publications have been included at the end of this document.

# Introduction

## On Irreducibility

The irreducibility between image and word is a subject with a substantial lineage and though there are doubtless much earlier examples of this vexed relation, this thesis is happy to set its earliest citation in 1767 and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön; An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Lessing's essay contains the oft-cited difference that painting contains and specialises in the depiction of space, whereas poetry discloses time, and that neither form can hope to better the other in their specialisms. In his words, in poetry, 'the action is visible and progressive, its different parts occurring one after the other in a sequence of time,' (Lessing, 1767, p77) whereas in painting, 'the action is visible and stationary, its different parts developing in co-existence in space.' (Lessing, 1767, p77)

As a brief aside: This thesis understands the irreducibility between image and word as that between the visual and the literary and when this thesis refers to the 'artwork' or 'the work of art' it is primarily, (though not exclusively,) discussing 'visual' experience. Therefore, this would not normally include a poem or a novel. That is not to say though, that the methodology I elucidate for bridging the gap between the work of art, and how to describe it, couldn't be applied to a poem or a novel, just that it wasn't the goal of this thesis to find such a method. Likewise, 'artwork', 'work of art' and 'painting' are used to some extent interchangeably. What is most important to note is that each artwork or painting has its own specific irreducibility, that needs addressing individually. Though it is fair to say that this thesis, like its author, has a bias toward painting.

This irreducibility is often seen as transmitted by something ineffable within the artwork. It becomes apparent when we wonder why the appeal of the work of art is indescribable. That there is something ineffable contained therein, is generally taken as a given, as Susan Sontag says in her essay *On Style* 'Every work of art... needs to be understood not only as something rendered, but also as a certain handling of the ineffable.' (Sontag, 1965 p36) The resultant formula might then be that as there is something ineffable in art, and as writing by its very nature is effable, then art as a different mode, cannot find agreement with writing. As painter Amy Sillman has it,

'There is a mystical part of making things or beholding the world that is very important to me... At the core of everything there's something that is unknowable, unconquerable, impenetrable, inexplicable, and enigmatic. Art is a temporary palliative for the anguish and blindness that we have to live through.' (Sillman, 2007 p54)

The passage that tends to be most-quoted in texts that discuss the irreducibility of these forms, is the following by Foucault. From the beginning of his essay on Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, contained within *The Order of Things*.

‘The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that the words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax.’ (Foucault, 1966, p9)

It is the severity of Foucault here that is important, he is clear that language and painting are so different as to make attempts at translating one form into the other is an impossible task. <sup>1</sup>

This thesis disputes that conclusion, and therein disputes an oft-stated artworld sentiment.

It is my claim that there *is* something singular about the appeal of an artwork – agreeing here with Foucault - but I reject the idea that it is hopeless to try and capture this appeal in words. As I say in Chapter Two, this thesis doesn’t dispute that magic exists, rather it disputes that it is ineffable.

To add some context here: It might be because of the *perceived* hopelessness in trying to capture the singular appeal of an artwork that art criticism is in such a parlous state. James Elkins has asked *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Before delimiting seven models that have replaced what might previously have been thought of as art criticism, (Elkins, 2003b). Likewise, Peter Osborne has stated that ‘contemporary art is badly known.’ (Osbourne, 2013, p1), before explaining why:

‘The dominant category of modernist art criticism was for many years, up until the 1960s, the category of medium. The subsequent dissolution of the limits of mediums as the ontological bases of art practices, and the establishment of a complex and fluid field of generically artistic practices, has posed new problems of critical judgement to which the concept of the contemporary represents an increasingly powerful response.’ (Osbourne, 2013, p3)

What Osborne is saying is that when faced with how to define art practice, critics can no longer resort to the definition of the medium to explain what art is or should be. And a present-day writer on art would instead use the definition of the ‘contemporary.’ But in either case, the ineffability of art is seemingly taken as certain, so those writing about art must instead categorise their focus. In the

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<sup>1</sup> What is (these days) said less often is that Foucault has written this before embarking on a chapter length analysis of a single painting. (Las Meninas). The quotability of the passage, its seeming appositeness at pinpointing exactly what it is that makes the task of writing about a painting impossible, leads us to forget that this is what Foucault was about to do. The painting, for Foucault, has been encoded by Velazquez, and shows us how a contemporaneous viewer thought about reality. Foucault finds within it an epistemological content. When I read his essay one of the things I think is ‘I can tell Foucault wasn’t a painter.’ The sensorial experience of the painting has been lost. So then, perhaps, the real point of Foucault’s introduction was to explain how he would be unable to elucidate an analysis of the work that tackles its painterliness. Only an epistemic one.

first case it was the category of the medium, in the second it was ‘the contemporary’. Whichever category is used to define the artwork, neither of them are satisfactory when required to describe the appeal of the artwork. The ineffable remains ‘out of reach.’

### **Personal Irreducibility**

On a personal level, as both a painter and a writer, this seemingly irreducible barrier between the literary and the visual manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, when I have tried to explain why I have chosen to paint the things that I have, and secondly in my frustration with much of the writing that has been written to accompany painting. Within this writing, (as mentioned above,) the sensorial experience of looking at a specific painting is lost. This sensorial experience or singular appeal is generally supplanted by a formal account of the surface of the work; the colours, the composition, etc. This account might be thought of as underlining the medium-specificity of the work, what makes the painting I am reading about, this particular painting, (so to speak.) The viewer is given a list of component parts of a work, rather than a prompt to a painting’s charm. (I discuss this charm later in terms of the ‘singular echo’, but the word ‘charm’, although vague, suffices for now). If not this then the painting is fitted into a larger schema, such as an artistic movement or a socio-political trend; the movement of capital at that time for example. An attempt to describe the singular appeal of the artwork has been replaced with an essay of economics, or with biographical information about the artist, what else they were doing when the work was made, who with, and where. We might think of these ways of ‘missing’ the painting – noted above – as three fallacies: the descriptive fallacy, the contextual fallacy or the biographical fallacy, (these are described in more depth later in the thesis.) In all these cases the specific experience of the artwork evades capture, or capture is not attempted as it is assumed that we can only describe the material formation or context of a painting or an artwork. One task of my thesis is to find a mode of writing that is adequate to it. As painter Amy Sillman says,

‘How can we get to issues of subjectivity and subject formation and things like that, and totally skip over the discussion of the simple relationship between us and the art subject and the art object?’ (Sillman, 2007, p18)

But secondly, as well as being a cause of frustration I have also utilised this perceived irreducibility. For five years I set myself the restriction of only making paintings of moments that I couldn’t describe the appeal of in words. These instances might be described prosaically as an overheard sentence that I couldn’t contextualise (see Appendix Three, p. viii), or the composition in a painting by Leonardo da Vinci (see Appendix Three, p. xvi) or some card left on a table (see Appendix Three, p. xii.) But though I can describe these instances matter-of-factly, I can’t describe what it was about them that appealed to me, that made them seem charged with the potentiality of a painting.

Following this, one of the hypotheses of this research was that, if the appeal of a seemingly irreducible moment can be translated into a painting, I should look to

my painting practice to find a method for writing about the ineffability of the artwork. This proved a productive strategy, the key being, as will be explained, to focus on the moment of irreducibility, the encounter with the ineffable, rather than the thing or artwork that was being encountered.

## **Irreducible Encounters**

To begin with we need to isolate the moments that we are saying are irreducible. I believe that this leaves us with four moments we can define as encounters. These are:

- 1) The encountering of something (stimuli) I think should be painted
- 2) The act of making a painting of that stimuli
- 3) The encounter with an artwork (spectating)
- 4) Writing a text about an artwork

I would bracket these encounters as dealing with the same phenomenon, defining them as encounters as Simon O'Sullivan does in his book *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*. His explanation is as follows:

‘An object of an encounter is fundamentally different from an object of recognition. With the latter our knowledges, beliefs and values are reconfirmed. With a genuine encounter however the contrary is the case. Our typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems of knowledge disrupted. We are forced to thought. The encounter then operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities... ..the rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world... This is the creative moment of the encounter that obliges us to think otherwise.’ (O'Sullivan, 2006, p1)

O'Sullivan stresses these encounters change or challenge the way we think about or experience the world, and posits that it is something distinctive to art.

‘Art then is the name of the object of an encounter, but also the name of the encounter itself, and indeed of that which is produced by the encounter. Art is this complex event that brings about the possibility of something new... .. They are all involved in questioning accepted assumptions about the world. We might even say that each produces a different kind of world, whether it be through a painting, an earthwork or indeed a form of collective collaboration.’ (O'Sullivan, 2006, p2)

So, art is three-layered, it is the object, the encounter and what is produced by it. The three are bound together. All the four encounters I have delimited as being fundamental to my practice are of the same order as this. What links them is their irreducibility; the encounter cannot be paraphrased by previous experience, so I feel I have to make a painting of it to understand it, but in painting it I translate the experience into the material substance of the painting. There is a subtle distinction between paraphrasing, that is summarising, and



translating that is trying to find something of similar significance. In many ways this distinction is the subject of my thesis.

In talking about the temporality of his own encounters with paintings O'Sullivan is surely referring back to Lessing's distinction between painting and poetry when he claims that 'this also implies a different temporality of painting, in fact an understanding of painting as an event. Indeed, this is the time of painting (just as it is the time of revolution.)' (O'Sullivan, 2006, p135)

So, the time of painting is the moment of the encounter with it. But if painting is an event and the artwork is the encounter, and the encounter the art, then, we need a way of writing about a *single* painting not Painting as a whole, or, *vis a vis* O'Sullivan, Art as a whole.

The encounter with an artwork, singular, is between the spectator, (who later might write about it,) and the work. But that specific work only. It is an intimate relation between two encountering forms, the writer and the painting. The task of this thesis has been to develop a method for writing about such an encounter. This is not the development of an 'a-social', or worse still anti-social art-theory. My position has an ethics, one outlined in Chapter 4.

In looking for a term to describe what it is we are trying to define – that particular or singular experience of a painting - we must be careful. For one, to use the term specificity is redolent of medium specificity, most often associated with Clement Greenberg and 1960's Modernism. (Greenberg, 1960) Likewise Adorno's sensuous particularity (Adorno, 1970) comes with its own 'baggage'. And, though we might understand this as an aesthetic encounter, as O'Sullivan does, 'as simply the name for an affective deterritorialization, a becoming,' (O'Sullivan, 2006, p22) aesthetics is another term that would require much unpacking and its meaning is too disputed to provide clarity.<sup>2</sup> We are therefore going to need a new term to describe that which is irreducible about the artwork encounter.

## **Translation / The Singular Echo**

I propose that it is useful to think that when one is writing about painting it is, as already intimated, a translation of one form into another. Sophie Collins writing on translation asks for 'intimacy' rather than fidelity in translation. Intimacy,

'is intended to shift the translation relationship from a place of universality, heteronormacy, authority and centralised power, towards a particularised space whose aesthetics are determined by the two or more people involved, in this way amplifying and promoting creativity and deviant aesthetics in translations between national languages.' (Collins, 2018)

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<sup>2</sup> For a rigorous unpacking of the slipperiness of the term, see the second chapter of Osborne's book, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*.

This take on translation emphasises a specific intimate relationship between two agents, in this case translator and writer, that I said I wanted the writer to look for when writing about artwork. In a beautiful essay entitled *The Task of The Translator* Walter Benjamin says that this task is ‘finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original.’ (Benjamin, 1923, p258). In my analysis it would be this echo that we are missing when we read most writing about painting.

‘Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.’  
(Benjamin, 1923 p258-259)

Each painting has its own *singular echo* that must be searched out and then translated. This singular echo can neither be approached in a description of the medium of painting; nor in an overview of whichever movement a work might be tagged as being a part; nor in a biography of the artist who created it. I will, therefore, use this term singular echo to describe that which has been previously missed by most writing about painting, the sensorial experience of an artwork, the event that looking at a painting is. As an echo is something that one is inside it underlines my assertion that the encounter with the artwork is as important as the artwork itself, when trying to describe the appeal of the artwork.

## **Irreducible Objects**

Instead of thinking this irreducibility as only existing between the literary and the visual we can change tack and adopt a philosophy of irreducibility for a new solution to the problem. To analyse the world in this way I looked to contemporary object philosophy as practiced by such philosophers as Ian Bogost, Graham Harman and Timothy Morton to provide us with the formula. Harman stresses that all representation is translation (Harman, 2010, p49) and it is he who has provided the most thorough philosophical framework for irreducible objects. He is the ‘first architect’ of the movement to use Morton’s words. (Morton, 2013, p19) Harman’s Object Oriented Ontology, (or OOO,) is a universe of withdrawn autonomous units or Objects.

Harman’s ontology began to gain traction as part of the Speculative Realism movement in philosophy, inaugurated in 2007 in opposition to the assumption that the ‘human-world gap is the privileged site of all rigorous philosophy.’ (‘Harman, 2011b, p136) Instead, the central conceit of Harman’s own philosophy is that objects, (as he defines them,) are the ‘root of all philosophy’ (‘Harman, 2011b, p138) he believes that ‘objects cannot be reduced to anything else, and must be addressed by philosophy on their own terms.’ (‘Harman, 2011b, p138) Harman, who as we shall see, might be classed as a contemporary phenomenologist, identifies the way that objects tend to be reduced and names these reductive strategies as either overmining or undermining. I unpack these terms in depth in Chapter One, but for now I will put it briefly and say when an object is overmined it is interpreted as a part in a larger schema, whereas when something is undermined it is reduced to its constituent parts.

I have transposed these reductive strategies onto the fallacious art writing types I identified above, (In Chapter Two of this thesis.) I also go on to show how opinions on painting and writing about painting often serves to overmine or undermine what I now call the singular echo of specific paintings, what Harman might term the object-ness of an individual painting. I critique over contextualisation, (overmining.) But also, the opposite move that provides a straight-forward description of artworks, (undermining.) I identify a vicious circle in relation to these methods that I term *the analytical roundabout*, and show that Harman provides a way ‘off’ this ‘roundabout.’

Within Harman’s ontology there is a metaphysics between objects that this thesis explicates. He outlines within all objects a fourfold structure containing the object and its qualities. He claims that ‘the tensions between objects and their qualities and other objects can be used to account for anything else that exists.’ (Harman, 2011b, p138)

I use one particular tension, that Harman classes as *allure* (Harman, 2005) and his theory of *vicarious causation* (Harman, 2005), to show how Harman’s solution to object encounters and how objects change within his ontology is also key to understanding how experience operates. Specifically, how experience-as-painter, and experience-as-spectator functions. In so doing I show how, in terms of spectatorship, OOO doesn’t fit comfortably into post-humanism, (where it is most often placed.) I also show how Harman’s perspective on spectatorship is different to other well recognised models – Heidegger, Greenberg, Fried - this analysis takes place in Chapter Three. The work I do here shows that Harman’s philosophy offers significant novel resources for spectator theory and a philosophy of art writing. Harman posits the solution that all encounters take place within a third object, one that is generated by the encounter. These newly-formed objects contain qualities of both objects involved in the encounter. It follows that such an object must be created by an artwork encounter; creating an object that is part-spectator and part-painting. Underling my conclusion that painting and encounter are, from this perspective, indissociable. My deduction is that if I were to describe this third object of the encounter, I would get closer to describing the singular echo.

So, the process of painting, and spectating are viewed through the lens of Harman’s ‘third object’ theory. I do significant work here identifying this theory within the ever-changing and evolving philosophy of Harman. This thesis is as much about explaining and interpreting Harman as it is transcribing it.

I provide the first account of a methodology for describing this third object and as a result the singular echo of the artwork. To avoid confusion between these two terms; the third object is generated between all encounters, I use singular echo to denote that which appeals about an encounter. In the case of this thesis that generally means the artwork encounter, but as this thesis develops I suggest that it is within a philosophy of encounters that we might find an ethics for ecological living.

There has previously been a little analysis of the relevance an influence of OOO within the artworld. Here, I provide a detailed practical application of this

philosophy onto an art-specific context; writing about art. I then use this application to work toward a better method for this writing.

I take the 'well-worn' problem of the irreducibility between the literary and the visual and examine it afresh, through the prism of OOO. This novel approach provides original insights into the problem and a methodology for working beyond it.

### **(Painting) Abstraction**

'Shields, masks, tools, artefacts, mirrors, Avebury Circle, swimming underwater, snorkelling, views from planes, volcanoes, mountains, waterfalls, rocks, graffiti, stains, damp walls, cracked pavements, puddles, the cosmos inside the human body, food, drink, being drunk, sex, music, dancing, relentless rhythm, the Caribbean, the tropical light, the northern light, the oceanic light. Primitive art, peasant art, Indian art, Japanese and Chinese art, musical instruments, drums, jazz, the spectacle of sport, the colour of sport, magic realism, Borges, the metaphysical, dawn, sunsets, fish eyes, trees, flowers, seas, atolls. The Book of Imaginary Beings, the Dictionary of Angels, heraldry, North American Indian blankets, Rio de Janeiro, Montego Bay!' (Gooding, 2011)

The list above was given by abstract painter John Hoyland when describing what inspires paintings. Within the context of Object philosophy, I found immediate synergy when I read the work of Ian Bogost, with its own insistence on the importance of lists. Bogost uses the term Ontography, (Bogost, 2012) (though it is distinct from Harman's own usage of the word Ontography, the two are very much allies within Object philosophy,) to describe the practice of compiling a list.

'Faced with such a situation, the first reaction we might have is that of the registrar, taking note of the many forms of being. Let's adopt ontography as a name for a general inscriptive strategy, one that uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity. From the perspective of metaphysics, ontography involves the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind. Like a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a compendium, record of things juxtaposed to demonstrate the overlap and imply interaction through collocation. The simplest approach to such recording is the list, a group of items loosely joined not by logic or power or use but by the gentle knot of the comma. Ontography is an aesthetic set theory, in which a particular configuration is celebrated merely on the basis of its existence.' (Bogost, 2012 p38)

The list then, maintains the autonomy of its components. This idea of an ontography as a record of everything, arranged non-hierarchically has symmetry with my own project of painting ineffable moments. I can surmise that abstract painter John Hoyland had a similar approach to abstraction, (in that it came

from real lived experience,) obvious from the above list of things he gave as inspiring his work. If and when I give such a list it is to underline the equivalence of these moments. The following list is the inspiration for fifteen of the paintings, in the order they appeared on my website in February 2017:

*A taxidermied toad, a fountain in the Jardines de Sabatini, Madrid, an advert for a car, a painting in a Delacroix exhibition, (though not by him), an intervention in the house of Joaquin Sorolla, a painting by Titian, a painting by Bellini, a girl looking at you through her hand, a gate, a diamond pattern in the manner of Cezanne, an instinctive landscape, a painting by Andrea del Sarto, the design on a box of screws, a plant, a painting by Paul Cezanne.*

All these encounters are of equal importance, each one ‘gets its own painting.’ There are no privileged ‘ineffable moments.’ As anthropologist and filmmaker Elizabeth Povinelli puts it, ‘to experience the truth of object relations, one must make all objects and their relations the same. The world must be a flat world.’ (Povinelli, 2016, p109). It is within this thought, of equivalent encounters, that the ethics of my thesis is enumerated in Chapter Four.

Moreover, Bogost tacitly and explicitly backs painting as record, as well as practice as research with the following statement:

‘Counterintuitive though it may seem, the characterisation of an experience though supposedly objective evidence and external mechanisms leads us farther from, not closer to, an understanding of the experience of an entity.’ (Bogost, 2012, p63.)

The implication being that it is a subjective record of experience that brings us closer to an entity, therefore painting, and therefore practice as research do the same. The task of this thesis was to find the method for writing the experience of the artwork, that would do the same.

Through this study I’ve realised that the translation of the ineffable moment into a painting, was not about trying to depict what I was looking at, but instead trying to paint the moment I wanted to make a painting of the thing I was looking at. This process finds accordance with Amy Sillman’s statement when she says, ‘I always felt like the only thing I’m representing is consciousness.’ (Sillman, 2007, p10) Particularly if the consciousness that Sillman is representing is consideration of something else.

I realised that this was coherent with Harman’s third object theory, as myself and the thing I was encountering were both contained within the third object. It was this third object, containing myself, stimuli, and the desire to paint the stimuli that I was translating into painting. Harman stresses that objects can only ever be approached obliquely: The representation of this third object became abstract, like Sillman, I viewed abstraction not as a heroic gesture but a non-hierarchical record of intimate experience.

If we were to think about the task of writing about painting in the same way, then it is the meeting with the artwork, not the artwork itself, that should be

written about; the third object we are inside, the sensorial experience of the engagement with the painting.

### **(Writing) Fictions for**

Through analysis of Harman I divined that that the viewer and the painting were fused together by the artwork encounter. This coupling takes place within a third object that we can think of as being, in effect, the encounter itself. My hypothesis is that by finding a way of describing this third object we will be describing the singular echo of the artwork.

If I remain true to Harman's doctrine, the only way I can describe an object is obliquely: I can't just list the qualities of this object, seek to summarise or paraphrase it, as that would fall into the reductionist strategies that Harman's designates as undermining and overmining. Therefore, I realised that I must write aesthetically about the painting, and that meant I must write fiction. This method must be endorsed, as, following Harman, we have to adopt an aesthetic response to objects. This includes the third object, (the object that is generated by an encounter with the artwork.)

In Chapter Four I think-through this third object with relation to fiction, specifically science-fiction. I develop a series of speculative techniques and strategies for five

These are fictions written for the artwork, rather than about the artwork, (as in traditional ekphrasis.) This is important distinction as it acknowledges the ineffability of the artwork can't be captured but by taking an oblique approach and writing about the encounter with the artwork we find ourselves closer to the artwork and capture its singular echo.

Fiction is not only the most appropriate method for capturing the singular echo because it is an aesthetic method, but also because of its intimacy. The relationship between a reader and a fictional world is an intimate one, as is the relationship between a spectator and a painting.

Creative responses to artworks, such as mine, tend to be bracketed as forms of ekphrasis. My research into ekphrasis, (included here in Chapter Four,) proved disappointing though. It provided examples of writing that sought to depict the artwork in question, not describe the way the encounter with it felt; the sensorial experience of it. For that what is needed is my own form of ekphrasis, an ekphrasis of the artwork encounter. An ekphrasis that might be termed associative ekphrasis.

### **Overview of Thesis**

The strategy of this thesis then, is in using OOO to frame the problem of irreducibility. Though much has been written about this problem, it hasn't previously been interrogated through the prism of contemporary object philosophy. I show that here we find a potential method for bridging the liminal space between the literary and the visual. This philosophical thesis both

provides support to and is supported by the practical research I have also undertaken.

In Chapter One, I provide the philosophical framework. This necessitates giving an overview of the foundations of Harman's philosophy, explaining both its contemporary philosophical context within the speculative realist movement and its background. Speculative realism began with embracing Quentin Meillassoux rejection of correlationism, a term I explain. I focus particularly on Harman's concepts of overmining and undermining which Harman mobilises to justify his ontology as the only philosophy that can explain the existence of objects as we experience them. I examine the geneses of Harman's thought, his interest in phenomenology and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. I give some detail of Heidegger's tool analysis and explain how Harman re-reads it to provide his own radical interpretation, leading to Harman's concepts of withdrawal and emergence. I likewise explain how Husserl's concept of intentionality has influenced Harman's thought on the sensual realm of existence. Harman calls the withdrawn reality of an object the Real Object, whereas the reality we experience is the Sensual Object. These two poles join with Real Qualities and Sensual Qualities to compose the four poles that Harman claims exist with every object in a structure he terms the Fourfold. I explain some of the relations that exist within this Fourfold, (and give further detail in Appendix One.)

I highlight the relation allure and the concept of vicarious causation as being fundamental to understanding both interaction between Harman's objects and how we might write about the singular echo of the artwork. The implications of this are unpacked at the end of Chapter Four.

The next stage is to apply what we have learnt about Harman's ontology to the practice of writing about art and in Chapter Two I go into more detail into what I termed above the three fallacies; the descriptive fallacy, the contextual fallacy and the biographical fallacy. I overlay Harman's concepts of undermining, overmining and duomining on top of them, as well as three categories of Elkins' to provide a more art-specific contextualisation. In doing so I show, with examples, how opinions on painting and writing about painting often serve to overmine or undermine the object-quality, or singular echo, of specific paintings. I split them into three categories: The Undermining Artist, The Overming Critic, and The Duomining Theorist. I critique over-contextualisation, but also the opposite move that provides a straight-forward description of artworks. I identify a vicious circle in relation to the fallacious methods, terming it 'the analytical roundabout', explaining how this lead to the adoption of Speculative Realism with art schools.

As already mentioned a philosophy of the artwork encounter means a consideration of spectatorship and in Chapter Three, I examine spectatorship through the prism of OOO. I begin by debunking misinterpretations of the artwork within OOO; namely the notion of an artwork existing without a spectator or a return to the modernistic spectator impressed by the 'auratic' artwork. I also unpack Harman's explanation for how this differs to the Post-

Modern or Relational spectator, namely that it relies on an attentive spectator who is immersed in the artwork, not in its relations. Following this I explain how spectatorship within OOO really operates. I then explicate Harman's concept of vicarious causation, as he does, through analysis of metaphor. This simultaneously completes a gap in Harman's ontology, in accounting for 'change', and gives instruction on how we might write about the singular echo of an artwork, namely by describing the encounter with the artwork, the third object the viewer and artwork are inside during the encounter.

In Chapter Four, I will provide a method for describing the third object encounter. As the thesis continues the tone changes, the analytical and diagnostic voice that probed Harman's philosophy becomes more personal as it speculates on how what we have learnt can be utilised as a practical device for writing and artmaking. This doesn't weaken the philosophical work that has preceded it, the conclusions simply have to be speculative given their nature. In adopting fiction as method consideration must be given to ekphrasis and this thesis uses Stephen Cheeke as guide to the traditional form of ekphrasis. It finds it lacking as it is generally simply a (however poetic) description of what is being looked at. Whereas this thesis requires a description of the experience of looking. An ekphrasis for the artwork encounter. The following section incorporates comparisons between Science Fiction and Abstraction as the two oblique approaches to representation favoured by the author. A method for writing is speculated on, incorporating four modes; metaphor, personal narrative, abstraction and intimacy. After proposing intimacy, the chapter ends with a brief consideration of a potential ethics inherent in aesthetics, on what might be termed a 'third object approach to living'. Centred on thinking more ecologically and local, resting upon the thought of philosopher Jane Bennet and writer Susan Sontag.

In Chapter Five, I give an overview of the practical research I have undertaken explaining its links with philosophical research. I begin with a recap of the implications of Harman's thought on the four encounters I identified as being fundamental to this study earlier in this introduction. I continue in the more personal tone that I began to adopt in the previous chapter. With that in mind I make the point that adopting Harman's 'aesthetic approach' to philosophy and advocating an 'oblique' response to artwork means it would be ridiculous to 'unpack' the paintings I have made and the texts that I have written as part of my research. However, I am able to give the framework I used when writing the texts and mobilise the lexicon of Harman to explain my painterly decisions. I explain in detail my decision-making process in one text, *The Battle of San Romano*, (written for the painting of the same name.) I also include analysis of the exhibitions I have organised and four of the paintings made as part of the study.

This theoretical thesis is accompanied by three publications, *Stories for Paintings*, a collection of fictions written for third object encounters as part of this research. *Morta Della*, which is one of these fictions combined with drawings made at the same time, and *The Polycephalus*, which was written for



one of the exhibitions I organised and acted as the only interpretive text for the show.

### **Contemporary context – Art Writing**

Though there hasn't previously been a study into the irreducibility between the literary and the visual through the prism of Object Oriented Ontology there are many writers who I would consider as allies to this study.

Writing as art practice has become more widespread this decade. There is, concurrently, if not a movement, then a tendency to look for alternative forms of art criticism. The *ELEVEN STATEMENTS AROUND ART WRITING* by Maria Fusco, Yve Lomax, Michael Newman, Adrian Rifkin, the teaching team of the now defunct MFA Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, give a flavour of the multifarious and playful nature of these two forms. That the Royal College of Art now offers an MA in writing and 'criticism' is a part of the title of the MA in Culture, Criticism and Curation at Central Saint Martin's shows the traction that writing as a creative and critical practice has gained.

Fusco's own practice is paradigmatic of writing as art practice; her 2017 book *The Legend of the Necessary Dreamer* was an exploration of a real space, (the Palácio Pombal in Lisbon, through fiction,) charging language with the task of evocating the materiality of the building. (Fusco, 2017)

There are now publishers dedicated to publishing experimental writing of this type. One such of these is Bookworks, who publish *The Happy Hypocrite*<sup>3</sup>. An example of a book published by Bookworks that uses fiction as art writing is Katrina Palmer *The Fabricator's Tale* (Palmer, 2014.) The stories within the book use the tropes of artworld discourse to construct a dysfunctional relationship that seem to be both about art practice and not about art practice simultaneously.

### **Context – Writing**

I am an avid reader of fiction beyond its use within art, of writing as well as 'art writing.' As already noted fiction makes one think metaphorically and empathetically; makes one think outside of the situation one is in and has provided inspiration in several different ways. Ali Smith's collection of essays *Artful* provided a valuable template for dealing with issues of criticism creatively, the following is an explanation of liminal space she provides within *Artful*,

'What's liminal space? ...It's kind of an in-between. A place we get transported to. Like when you look at a piece of art or listen to a piece of

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<sup>3</sup> Issue 10 of *The Happy Hypocrite*, Tolstoyevsky, included the text *Morta Della* which was written as part of the practical research undertaken for this thesis

music and realise that for a while you've actually been somewhere else because you did.' (Smith, 2012, p111)

That I found redolent of this study, with its own focus on the space in-between painting and writing. But with its exhortations and endorsement of an aesthetic philosophy there were several passages I found in novels I was reading, unrelated to my research, that seemed appropriate to OOO. I shall limit myself to just one, from *The Man who was Thursday*, in which Syme is seemingly speaking the words of Graham Harman,

'Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front-' (Chesterton, 1908, p160)

### **Contemporary context – Critical Writing**

Further to the practice of Art Writing mentioned above. In thinking through how to produce critical writing for the artwork encounter, the criticism of performance practices has proven instructive in how one can think of the non-objective experience; as writing for an encounter is about more than the 'art-object.' Della Pollock's writing on *Performative Writing for Performance Art* is one example of such criticism, and her thinking-through how the ephemeral nature of viewing performance might be captured. (Pollock, 1988)

In terms of more general approach to critical and theoretical practices, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's incorporation of affect theory is insightful and generous. (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003) It proved particularly useful in illustrating how one's own theoretical conclusions can sit beside another's, without the need to polemicize. (See Chapter Two for more details.)

### **Contemporary context – Painting**

When it comes to painting, Amy Sillman is an obvious ally for my project as already noted, apparent in the extended quotation below. In both asking for concentration on the specificity of an individual artwork but also in taking seriously the metaphorical content of it.

'I'd like to really, really talk about a painting's, or art object's, qualities. This is an underdeveloped muscle in critical apparatus. I think we should be looking at objects formally, while understanding that, of course, content is part of form and form is part of content and abstraction now and what they are really doing. I wish there was less embarrassment, less tension around a kind of formal and poetic response, where you describe something in terms of feeling or association, or you look at how something plays, rather than just how it signifies, or how it deals with the literary, marketplace or distribution systems that lie around it. Some

critical language around art may fall short, and need to be refreshed, or be dropped.' (Sillman, 2007, p16)

# Chapter One: Speculative Realism and The Missing Object

## Abstract

In this chapter I will give an overview of the background to Harman's philosophy, explaining both its contemporary philosophical context within the Speculative Realist movement and its foundation on his concepts of overmining and undermining. I examine the roots of Harman's metaphysics, his interpretation of Heidegger's tool analysis and Husserl's concept of intentionality. His understanding of both leads him to posit a fourfold structure within all objects and this is also explicated. I elucidate the relations within this fourfold that are pertinent to this study. I claim that the relation Allure and the concept of Vicarious Causation are fundamental to understanding change within Harman's ontology and of prime importance to this study. This importance is due to how Harman completes the 'gap' in his ontology; namely how do withdrawn objects touch. I will apply his solution to the previously irreducible forms of writing and painting.

## Introduction to Speculative Realism

'If a common thread can be said to connect the diverse schools of speculative realism (or, speculative materialism), that thread would be common abhorrence of Immanuel Kant's influence on metaphysics and critical theory.' (Povinelli, 2016, p107)

Speculative Realism began as a conference at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2007 at which Harman was one of four philosophers who presented. Equally synonymous and present were Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant and Quentin Meillassoux. As Brassier says; 'The impetus for the original, eponymous workshop was to revive questions about realism, materialism, science, representation, and objectivity, that were dismissed as otiose by each of the main pillars of Continental orthodoxy: phenomenology, critical theory, and deconstruction.' (Brassier, 2014 p 417)

Half of the name Speculative Realism was overtly borrowed from Meillassoux's name for his own philosophy; Speculative Materialism. (Meillassoux, 2006) He introduced this viewpoint in his book *After Finitude*. (2006), in which he delineates the steps philosophy can reach beyond the finitude of human knowledge, the limits previously placed on it within the thought of Immanuel Kant (1781) These limitations were described in one of an abundance of 'primers' on the Speculative Realist movement that have been published since 2007 as follows; 'the social and cognitive conditions of thought restrict and shape what can be thought and repudiate the claim that there can be knowledge of the real as such other than in terms of its cognition and discourses.' (Avanessian & Malik, 2016, p1)

That is Kant's assertion that as we exist in / understand / experience the world we simultaneously mediate it, so that we can claim no genuine knowledge of the 'real' unfiltered world, only of the world that we experience. This 'real' unfiltered world Kant refers to as noumenal, or 'the thing in itself,' and the world as we know it as the phenomenal world. (Kant 1781)

According to the Speculative Realists, philosophers since Kant have tended to agree that the noumenal world is unknowable and this position of limited access has been the grounding of philosophy; we can only postulate accurately on that which we can think, so the world outside of thought is unknowable to philosophy. (Harman, 2011, p4) Or as Meillassoux has it, 'The idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other' (Meillassoux, 2006, p5)

This usage of the term correlation leads Meillassoux to coining the term correlationism, (Meillassoux, 2006) a term that has proved popular within and without the Speculative Realist movement. As Harman calls it, it is a 'permanent contribution to the philosophical lexicon.' (Harman, 2011, p7) It is a term used by others to refer to the aforementioned restriction placed on human thought by adopting this Kantian position, and the problematic limitations this places on philosophy. For Harman and others, a rejection of correlationism is what unites the Speculative Realists. (Harman, 2011b, p136)

Instances of such correlational limitations within Continental philosophy, might be found within poststructuralism. To give two examples, either in a Derridean sense, which prioritised the usage of language as a prism through which the world might be accessed or analysed. (Derrida, 1967) Or, in a Baudrillardian sense; in which the real world no longer exists and has been replaced by a simulation. (Baudrillard, 1983) This gives a clue as to why Speculative Realism has gained traction within an art context, a topic I will describe in more detail in the next chapter, but it is founded on the limitations of a textual analysis of the visual. As philosopher Tom Sparrow points out, not only is this a limiting perspective, the correlationist position is also hubristic, prioritising an anthropocentric viewpoint: 'The problem is that this supposition reduces the real to the meaningful, as if our capacity to make sense of the universe encompassed the totality of what the universe is.' (Sparrow, 2014, p87)

So, the belief in a universe outside of what can be thought made the four philosophers realists, (in a philosophical sense,) and this is the realism of Speculative Realism. These are philosophers who want to talk about this noumenal world. Meillassoux refers to this space, that philosophy has been denied access to, as 'the Great Outdoors,' (Meillassoux, 2006) and his goal is, 'Waking us from our correlational slumber, by enjoining us to reconcile thought and absolute.' (Meillassoux, 2006, 128)

For all four philosophers not only does the real world exist but to some, (Harman included,) it is also accessible or knowable through philosophy. They each have their own strategies for accessing the real, their own realisms; it is Graham Harman's 'Weird Realism' (Harman, 2005) that is the focus of this

thesis. Sparrow describes this realism as one that ‘multiplies the dimensions of reality by identifying those irreducible speculative moments of philosophical analysis that summon us to assume a realist stance because idealism, correlationism, and the linguistic turn leave us wanting.’ (Sparrow, 2014, p146) That is to say, Sparrow promises us that when other philosophies have fallen short of their subject, not only will Harman’s philosophy show us what we have previously been missing, he will also give us the philosophical tools to describe it.

## **Caveat**

As a caveat or coda to this section it is worth noting that there is some debate as to whether Speculative Realism still refers to anything concrete, be it a movement or even a shared philosophical position. Brassier in particular has been particularly hostile to the term. As he has it: ‘Impatience with the rhetoric of finitude and distaste for excessively mannered prose hardly amounts to a common philosophical agenda.’ (Brassier, 2014, p414) Clearly stating that a belief in the limitations of ‘correlationism’ is not enough to bracket these philosophers together, that their differences are more profound than their similarities.

However, though there might be strong cause to dismiss Speculative Realism as a coherent philosophical movement there can be little doubt that it provided Harman with the opportunity to launch his own philosophy, his Object Oriented Ontology, or OOO. He describes the opportunity thusly,

‘Once we give up the notion... that philosophy should deal only with the conditions of possibility of objects or of human access to them, everything changes. From that moment on, every aspect of our experience, from the simplest motion of dogs and waiters to our dealings with ruined glass, wire, and cardboard in a garbage dump, begins to bear witness to a genuine metaphysical event’ (Harman, 2005, p179-80).

Before continuing it will be useful to insert a definition of Metaphysics and Ontology taken from the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy. Metaphysics is:

‘The philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality. It is broader in scope than science... since one of its traditional concerns is the existence of non-physical entities, e.g., God. It is also more fundamental, since it investigates questions science does not address but the answers to which it presupposes. Are there, for instance, physical objects at all, and does every event have a cause?’ (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995, p563)

Metaphysics was called first philosophy as it is the study of ‘the most general and necessary characteristics that anything must have in order to count as a being, an entity.’ (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995, p564) The definition continues on the subject of ontology that ‘Sometimes ‘ontology’ is used in this sense, but this is by no means common practice, ‘ontology’ being

often used as a synonym of ‘metaphysics’.’ (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995, p564)

The entry on Ontology is simply ‘see metaphysics’ (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995, p631) so we can conclude that the two words are often synonymous with one another. In Harman’s case, he builds his own ‘realism’ as an ontology and metaphysics. His ontology as how he separates the world into fundamental constituents; non-reducible entities he classes as Objects. Because of the idiosyncratic nature of these objects and their relations, there are metaphysical implications as he details how they interact.

### **Graham Harman’s Objects**

Harman believes that objects are the root of all philosophy. (Harman, 2011b, p 138.) And in short, everything is an object.

‘Along with diamonds, ropes and neutrons, objects may include armies, monsters, square circles, and leagues of real and fictitious nations.’  
(Harman, 2011b, p5)

As well as everything being an object, these objects are equal as objects, (this is a flat or non-hierarchical ontology,) and all relations between objects are equivalent and indeed are often objects as well. This is true of the human, the animal, the mineral, the fictional, the organic, the inorganic, the temporal, and the categorical. (Harman, 2002)

He defines objects as follows: ‘An object is anything that is more than its components and less than its effects.’ (Harman, 2016, p218) As we shall this means any unit that isn’t exhausted by description, be that by listing its constituents or by explaining what it does. This, therefore is a broad definition.

Accordingly, Harman would agree with me on the irreducibility of the encounters I elucidated in the introduction, and indeed, of the literary and the visual, that one cannot paraphrase the other. However, that is because he believes that nothing can be paraphrased or reduced, almost everything is its own autonomous unit, or object.

The tendency to paraphrase or reduce objects is one that Harman identifies as rife and mendacious within philosophy, both historically and contemporaneously. As he says,

‘Instead of accepting this inflated menagerie of entities, critical thinking debunks objects and denies their autonomy. They are dismissed as figments of the mind, or as mere aggregates built of smaller physical pieces.’ (Harman, 2011b, p7)

## **Undermining, Overmining and Duoming**

In choosing to take an ontological approach to philosophy Harman has to prove why it is objects that we should be focussing on, and he is keen to underline the centrality of the entities he has designated as objects to existence. To do this he begins most introductions to his ontology by detailing how other philosophers or theorists have treated objects poorly. (Harman, 2011b) He classifies these mistreatments as falling into three categories: undermining, overmining and duoming.

‘Those who deny that objects are the building block of philosophy have only two basic alternatives. They can say that objects are a mere surface effect of some deeper force, so that the object is undermined. Or they can say that objects are a useless superstition in comparison with their more evident qualities or relations, so that the object is ‘overmined.’ (Harman, 2011b, p6)

### **Undermining**

Undermining is to reduce things to smaller components, that is, rather than to think of propositions and entities as ‘ontologically basic’ it is to find out what constitutes them: ‘The first critical response to objects asserts that they are not fundamental. All of the dogs, candles, and snowflakes we observe are built of something more basic, and this deeper reality is the proper subject matter for philosophy.’ (Harman, 2011b, p8)

This is a strategy with a long history, Harman refers to pre-Socratic philosophers such as Thales, Anaximenes, Empedocles and Democritus who each thought that the building blocks of the world were respectively; water and air or earth, water, fire and air or differently shaped and sized atoms. (Harman, 2011b, p8) The problem though is not limited to Ancient Greece, and a parallel with contemporary science and particle physics is obvious. It is less common in social theory but sometimes occurs and Harman singles out another contemporary philosophical movement, New Materialism (Harman, 2014c) as being guilty of undermining when it forefronts humans’ dependence on their environment and its constituents, such as micro-bacteria, atmospheric conditions or the natural world in general. (Harman, 2016b, p8-9)

‘All of them claim that objects are too specific to deserve the name of ultimate reality, and dream up some deeper indeterminate basis from which specific things arise... They view objects as too shallow to be the fundamental reality of the universe.’ (Harman, 2011b, p10)

According to Harman theories that undermine are flawed as they cannot account for emergence, that is, why there are distinct entities and why these entities can be altered but continue to exist. In Harman’s words, ‘an object is not equal to the exact placement of its atoms, since within certain limits these atoms can be replaced, removed, or shifted without changing the object as a whole.’ (Harman, 2016b, p9)



But this is also true of entities on a non-molecular level; people move in and out of London all the time, but London still exists. Things have a conceptual solidity no matter how well you might explain what they consist of.

## **Overmining**

In the opposite fallacy, Overmining, rather than reducing the objects downwards, we paraphrase them within another system, they are talked of as causal agents or as part of trends. Unlike undermining, overmining is common within the Humanities according to Harman (Harman, 2016b, p10.) It is an attitude that in Harman's words sees that, 'objects are important only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that privileges affects over people as well.' (Harman, 2011b, p11)

But for Harman a philosophy that exemplifies the strategy of overmining is Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (or ANT.) Though that is not to say that he dislikes Latour, he has authored more than one book on him, and describes him thus, 'Latour is surely the most stimulating present-day thinker of overmining,' (Harman, 2016b, p10)

The following tenet of ANT might be a paradigm of overmining with its emphasis on the effect of a unit rather than the unit itself. The tenet states that: 'There is no other way to define an actor than through its actions, and there is no other way to define an action but by asking what other actors are modified, transformed, perturbed, or created,' (Latour, 1999, p122)<sup>4</sup>

The problem with defining an object (or actor) in these terms is that it means that all an object is, is its effects and no more. As Harman says:

'Whether we praise objects for their agency or brashly deny that they have any, we overlook the question of what objects do when not acting. To treat objects solely as actors forgets that a thing acts because it exists rather than existing because it acts. Objects are sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve, and do not unleash all their energies at once.'  
(Harman, 2016b, p7)

Harman often uses Aristotle's rebuttal of the Megarians to underline the falsity of this position. The Megarians stated that only someone building a house can claim to be a house-builder, but that does not account for a house-builder who might be asleep or a house-builder that has since retired, to wit, there is more to an object than what it is engaged with at a given moment.

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<sup>4</sup> Harman would also include Humean empiricism in this category as describes objects as bundles of qualities, actualised as objects by our minds. See *Lucy Kimbell & Graham Harman (2013). The Object Strikes Back: An Interview with Graham Harman.*

## Duominig

Duominig has its own Ancient Greek progenitor in Parmenides who in Harman's words 'proclaimed a double cosmos with a single unified Being on one side,' (Harman, 2016b, p11) this unified being is extrapolated in the Cambridge dictionary of philosophy in the following manner, 'that "the real" or "what-is" or "being" ...must be ungenerable and imperishable, indivisible, and unchanging.' (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995, p646) This would be overmining as, as we have seen, it includes everything within an interlinked unchanging whole. On the other side of Parmenides cosmos is 'Opinions,' 'the second part of the poem, he expounds a dualist cosmology,' (Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995, p647) where despite the unified nature of existence he proposes that the world as we experience is 'a truthless play of opinion and appearance on the other,' (Harman, 2016b, p11) which would be undermining as it reduces the world to its constituents, in this case this is its appearance and beliefs.

As mentioned previously it is both under and overmining simultaneously. It is common in much of Scientific Materialism according to Harman, as alongside reducing objects down to particles, quarks or strings it paraphrases them upwards as part of an overarching mathematical schema. (Harman, 2016b, p11-12)

'The whole of modern science is a duominig project, since it aims both to reduce objects downward to the most basic constituents *and* to claim that these things are, in principle, knowable through mathematization.' (Harman, 2013b, p46)

All three of these positions are fundamentally flawed for Harman as, much like the writing about art I referenced earlier, they take us further from the truth / essence of the object than closer to it. (Harman, 2011b)

To summarise; by undermining an object and describing it in only its constituent parts we are unable to account for the whole that emerges from all the 'atoms' that makes it up, that I am distinct from the thing next to me, and can lose atoms to it whilst still remaining myself. Whereas overmining fails to leave account for change, a potentiality for difference. If all substance is connected in one network, say a rhizomatic system, with the individual agents defined by their causal impact, agents through which energy pulses along, then, where does that energy come from? Where is the surplus within the system if everything in the system is connected? Likewise, what is an object's status when it is not involved in this system if an object is only about 'whatever they modify, transform, perturb, or create'? (Harman, 2016b, p10) Does it still exist? To Harman it is self-evident that it does and therefore overmining strategies fail. Duominig is to perform both reductions at once, as in Scientific Materialism when an object is explained as part of a larger schema whilst simultaneously reducing to its smallest constituents.

## The Third Table

It is perhaps useful at this juncture to give further example of these reductive strategies in action. In his text *The Third Table*, written for *dOCUMENTA 13*<sup>5</sup> Harman uses Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington's parable of two tables from his 1927 Gifford lecture as the starting point to explain this and his philosophy of objects. Eddington asserts that his world, exemplified by the table he is sitting at writing the lecture, is split into two; divided between the quotidian, 'substantial' manifest world and table, and the world and table he knows exists because of his study of physics; actually, a composite of 'electric charges,' bouncing about one another. (Harman, 2012b, p7) For Harman these are just the overmined or undermined caricatures of the table. Harman thinks both worlds ignore the real table, the first as the table is more than what is graspable in an everyday sense; it is more than simply an example of a particular type of table and is not wholly explained by its usage. Though Eddington 'knows' the table as the desk he writes at, that doesn't mean he knows all of it, it has a reality more complex than that, a reality that can never be completely explored; like the ship of Theseus, even if he had changed parts of it, scratched it, or even destroyed the table, the table will continue to exist whether the same but altered or in memory. Therefore, it has a reality we can't access; the table is more than 'its theoretical, practical, or causal effects on humans or on anything else.' (Harman, 2012b, p10)

Likewise, though, we can imagine that we could look at the table through a quantum microscope and see the atoms that it consists of; it is more than simply a collection of atoms. Not only could some of these atoms be removed without altering the table but also, simply saying what something is made of, does not bring us any closer to its reality: '[T]he table has an autonomous reality over and above its causal components, just as individual humans cannot be dissolved back into their parents.' (Harman 2012, p7-8)

So, Harman concludes:

'Eddington's first table ruins tables by turning them into nothing but their everyday effects on us or on someone else. Eddington's second table ruins tables by disintegrating them into nothing but tiny electric charges or faint material flickerings. Yet the third table lies directly between these other two, neither of which is really a table. Our third table emerges as something distinct from its own components and also withdraws behind all its external effects.' (Harman, 2012b, p10)

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<sup>5</sup> In 2012 the director of *dOCUMENTA 13*, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, commissioned a series of 100 'notebooks' for the festival. Each of these was designed to illuminate a particular way of thinking, many took a position that might be described as post-humanist\*. That number 85 of these was by philosopher Graham Harman shows the significance and influence Harman and the emerging philosophy Speculative Realism had, and still has, within the art world.

\*Because of the determination within Speculative Realism to move beyond the anthropocentric, there is a tendency to bracket all non-human-centred or post-human philosophy together. The aim of keeping OOO distinct from these philosophies might explain Harman's keenness to emphasise the overmining and undermining that occurs in Latour and New Materialism.

Knowledge of what the table is made of is predicated on the notion that the table exists. But this table, the third table, is ignored by science or the humanities who simply want to explain what it is made of or what it does. (Harman, 2016, p180)

Likewise, we can assert in this study we are looking for a third way of writing about an artwork, one that doesn't rely on simply describing what it is we are looking at or explaining its existence using conceptual apparatus.

## **Withdrawal and Emergence**

The notion of withdrawal is vital in Harman's philosophy. It is a notion he has taken from his understanding and reading of Heidegger and other phenomenologists. (Harman, 2002 & 2005) This is readily apparent in Tom Sparrow's book *The End of Phenomenology*; structured around a reconsidering of Phenomenology in the light of Speculative Realism, most specifically Harman's OOO,

'Among the philosophers associated with speculative realism, the richest and most extensive engagement with phenomenology is found in the work of Graham Harman.' (Sparrow, 2014, p114)

Regarding the concept of withdrawal, it is specifically Heidegger's notion of *Zuhandenheit* in his tool-analysis, most often translated as 'ready-to-hand' (In opposition to *Vorhandenheit* or 'presence-to-hand') that Harman engages with. (Harman, 2002) Indeed, the entire metaphysics of Harman's ontology depend on his reading of this tool-analysis:

'Heidegger's tool-analysis should not be read as a limited account of human productive or technical activity. Instead, it turns out that with the theory of equipment Heidegger gives us an insight of overwhelming scope, one that cannot be restricted to 'tools' in the narrow sense of the term, and ultimately cannot even be restricted to the sphere of human life.' (Harman, 2010b, p45)

Harman is clear that his is not a traditional reading of the tool-analysis, and moreover, that his reading is not one that Heidegger himself would have approved. (Harman, 2011) However, this dualism between withdrawal and presence is the essential binary of Harman's philosophy and one taken from Heidegger. It is here that Harman finds the *nature* of being that inspires his ontology. Being to Heidegger, (to Harman's mind,) is that which rejects presence, it is 'something deeper than all specific beings.' (Harman, 2007, p173)

As Harman is keen to emphasise his diversion from Heidegger, it is perhaps useful to incorporate another source for a more traditional reading of the tool-analysis. For this purpose we will use Tom Greaves' *Starting with Heidegger*. (Greaves, 2010)

Heidegger uses the word *Dasein* to describe humans' beingness in the world, this is a being that is rooted in its environment, connected to its world through

its existence within it, but also through its usage of the equipment that the world provides or that Dasein has invented to help navigate it. (Greaves, 2010, p38-41) It is a 'context of involvements,' (Greaves, 2010, p41), that Dasein doesn't notice as they go about their existence. Greaves gives the example of going fishing, when not only is the 'fishing tackle' necessary but also the rivers or lakes the fish live in, the plants oxygenating the water so the fish can survive there, the environmental conditions and the environment itself (Greaves, 2010 p40.) Therefore, we begin to see the extent of the 'equipment' that surrounds Dasein, but this symbiosis between Dasein and the world raises a question, articulated below by Greaves, that is, how does the world make itself apparent to Dasein?

'If Dasein is caught up in the whole of its surroundings, where there are primarily no items of equipment but only the whole involved tackle of ready to hand by means of which it handles and negotiates its surroundings, how is it that any part of this whole ever shows up within the world?' (Greaves, 2010, p42)

The equipment is so ready-to-hand, so embedded in the system in which Dasein has found itself, that the equipment has withdrawn. (Heidegger, 1927, p18) What happens, to make us, as Dasein, more aware of our surroundings? The answer is that there must be the potential for things within this system to change for this to be the case; for the equipment to emerge from the background and become present to us by no longer performing as we expect it to. (Greaves, 2010)

This happens in stages, Greaves tells us in his book, using the example of a fishing line. In the first instance the line snaps, but Dasein has a replacement line, stronger and thicker so it is quickly replaced and withdraws from notice. But perhaps the line is missing, or perhaps the fish simply can't be caught. (Greaves, 2010, p40) When something becomes isolated or removed it becomes 'present-to-hand' for instance if it was removed for theoretical study. Finally, it is important to note that these are not fixed statuses, there is fluctuation in the equipment between being withdrawn or not (Greaves, 2010, p43)

The tool analysis is often exemplified with a hammer; when we have to hammer a nail we pick up and drive in the nail with fluidity. The hammer itself has been circumvented by its usage; we don't really see a hammer but paraphrase it and the action we use it for: It has become one with its assumed usage, or withdrawn behind it, and we see 'that with which we drive in a nail.' (Greaves, 2010) It is here classed as 'ready-to-hand' or *Zuhandenheit*. However, were the hammer to break, to not be able to adequately perform its role, then we notice the hammer. Its 'un-readiness-to-hand' is what we notice, or rather it becomes 'present-to-hand' or *Vorhandenheit*.

The crux of Harman's reading of Heidegger is that we can extrapolate Heidegger's notion of 'tool being' i.e. of equipment that withdraws and emerges, and apply it across all being, (Harman, 2002, p16) and this means across all objects, so that the nature of existence is this dualism between withdrawal and emergence.

Heidegger's 'dual structure [of revealing and concealing] belongs to every entity, and is not a statement about the ups and downs of human activity' (Harman, 2002, p4) As Sparrow's reading of Harman rightly concludes: 'Every object whatsoever is always at the same time a tool in action and a 'broken' tool.' (Sparrow, 2014, p128)

If we think back to the point Harman was making by identifying over and undermining strategies: that there is always more to an object than what is present to us, and that this depth is not accessible by analysing it in microscopic detail (undermining) or by examining its influence, (overmining.) There is always more to it than can be paraphrased. We can never exhaust its reality by listing its qualities or by putting it in context; there is a withdrawn reality to every object. (Harman, 2011b)

Another characteristic of Harman's philosophy, one that distinguishes him from other speculative realists. For instance, he criticises Meillassoux for keeping the human / world relationship at the centre of philosophy whereas for Harman: 'Even inanimate objects fail to grasp each other as they are in themselves; finitude is not just a local spectre haunting the human subject, but a structural feature of relations in general, including non-human ones.' (Harman, 2011, p4)

So, any relation he identifies should be applicable across all his ontology, should be able to be extrapolated as one that exists between all objects. As an example, to underline the withdrawal of objects, Harman imports Islamic Occasionalist philosophy to prove his point. When fire burns a white sheet of cotton it is not the whiteness of the cotton that catches fire, nor is it the texture of the sheet that is aflame, the fire has only made contact with the flammability of the cotton. ('Harman, 2011b, p73) Objects interact with the facets of other objects selectively, and interaction with one such facet doesn't exhaust the reality of that object, there is always a hidden depth to it. As Sparrow says,

'Harman's critical point against Heidegger: the withdrawal of objects from presence is not the effect of human interaction alone, but is what occurs whenever an object interacts with the phenomenal surface of any other object. Which is always. Nothing can unearth the object's concealed tool-being; it is hopelessly, absolutely invisible. It is absolutely real.' (Sparrow, 2014, p129)

So, every object in his system is perpetually in a state of 'tool-being', each one having a ready-to-hand profile that he designates as the Real Object and this is true of everything, humans, furniture, NGOs and car-manufacturers. All of them have a withdrawn reality that we cannot parse without a reductive gesture, i.e. overmining, undermining or duoming them. (Harman, 2011b)

As fellow ontologist Tristan Garcia explains this is also why every entity is equally an object. There is no reason to suppose a difference between the 'real' and the imagined because the split is elsewhere in his ontology between the Real and the Sensual, in Garcia's words:

"Since, for him an ontological difference exists between the real object, withdrawn into itself, and the sensual object, internal to perception, there

is no need to assume that there is an underlying difference between material or immaterial objects, sensory or non-sensory objects, conscious or unconscious objects." (Garcia, 2013, p15)

This notion of withdrawal is relevant to us as we could easily overlay the idea of objects with a withdrawn reality of onto the idea of an artwork with an ineffability we cannot parse. Harman's solution to how this withdrawal might be bridged will instruct us in how to make the artwork effable.

This is the first part of Harman's metaphysics. He, also, posits that all objects within his system, ergo the world, contain four poles or profiles the first one of which is the Real Object which he has co-opted from Heidegger's tool analysis. The other three poles contained by all objects are: Sensual Object, Sensual Qualities, and Real Qualities, and he refers to this schema as 'The Fourfold'. (Harman, 2011b)

### **The Sensual Object**

Harman concludes the passage on the tool-analysis within his own primer on Heidegger with the following passage:

'This brilliant tool-analysis is perhaps the greatest moment of twentieth-century philosophy. Its primary target is obviously Husserl. What comes first are not phenomena that appear to consciousness. Phenomena are only rare cases of visible things emerging from a dominant silent background of equipment.' (Harman, 2007, p63)

Harman believes Husserl was the target as, according to Harman, Husserl is only interested in how things manifest themselves to human consciousness. This means sequestering the reality of objects so that they needn't to be interrogated by his philosophy. The outcome of which is that Husserl is unable to provide a definition for the being of these objects. (Harman, 2007, p42) Whereas Heidegger has started with the 'beingness' of these objects and explained their phenomenological occurrence afterwards. (Pivocevic, 1970, p112)

That is not to say though that Harman is interested in discrediting Husserl as he takes almost as much from Husserl for his metaphysics as he does from Heidegger. Harman's roots are in the phenomenological tradition, and he has found inspiration for his own Ontology in Husserl's concept of intentionality. As Peter Wolfendale says, 'his is a metaphysics of intentional relation, and his account of intentionality is fundamentally culled from the phenomenological tradition and its methodology of immanent description.' (Wolfendale, 2014, p31)

If every object has a withdrawn centre that is hidden from our access, it also has visible profile to us, what we might call its 'present-at-hand' profile, this is referred to by Harman as the Sensual Object. This Sensual Object is what Husserl would have called the 'intentional object'; that is something as it appears to us. Or, in the lexicon of Harman, the Sensual Object is the profile of

an object seen by any other object: The world as it appears to us is the Sensual world, and Sensual world is phenomenological;

‘Phenomenology walls philosophy off from science by asking us to forget every scientific theory about how the world works, and to focus instead on a patient, detailed description of how the world appears to us before we invent any theories. In our everyday experience, we do not hear sound waves, but simply hear a door slamming; the sound waves are just a scientific theory, no matter how solid this theory may seem.’ (Harman, 2007, p4)

As one of the progenitors of phenomenology, Husserl was concerned with this ‘world as it occurs to us’, consciousness is always conscious of something else. This world is what Husserl (and Brentano before him) referred to as the intentional world, the world as we see it, and there is substantial overlap between the Intentional World of Husserl and the Sensual World of Harman.

As he did with Heidegger’s concepts of withdrawal and emergence within the tool-analysis, Harman grafts Husserl’s concept of intentionality onto his objects. Or, in the words of Sparrow: ‘Harman expands the concept of intentionality in his own work so that intentions are not just something enacted by humans.’ (Sparrow, 2014, p118)

For Husserl these objects only existed in our consciousness, in our intentionality, and not outside of that. This is a form of ‘Idealism,’ according to Harman (Harman, 2011) and Harman develops the Real profiles of his objects to counter this.

Like, for Husserl, for Harman the Sensual Objects we encounter within this world are all representations of reality. The difference being that there is what might be called a ‘hard reality’ behind these representations. These are the Real Objects Harman has taken from Heidegger. The Sensual Object we see is just one side of an object, it has another side or profile which is the Real Object: ‘There is not a world of appearances (sensual objects) and a world of concealed tool-beings (withdrawn objects). There are just two dimensions of the same world, the world of objects. And we, too, are examples of those objects.’ (Sparrow, 2014, p137)

As Sparrow says this binary is at the crux of Harman’s philosophy. An object has its Real profile and its Sensual profile. Its Sensual profile is what other Real Objects encounter, they never encounter another Real Object as that is always withdrawn.

And Harman gives this intentionality to all objects, so the Real table encounters a Sensual profile of myself just as it encounters a Sensual profile of the pencil resting upon it. As Sparrow puts it: ‘Harman expands the concept of intentionality in his own work so that intentions are not just something enacted by humans.’ (Sparrow, 2014, p118)

So, the Sensual object is what we see, but it doesn’t always look the same to us, this is because of its Sensual Qualities, another component of The Fourfold.



## **Sensual Qualities**

Harman finds this part of his fourfold in Husserl as well. What is key for Harman as it was for Husserl, is that as we approach an object, a tree for example, though it may look differently depending on time of day or season, we draw these different Sensual Qualities together to create an independent Sensual Object.

Husserl referred to these qualities as adumbrations, they are the surface-effects that might alter the way something looks to us, does not prevent us from acknowledging its existence as a whole. (Harman, 2011b, p24-26) We recognise the object as independent of its Sensual Qualities as those can change, whereas the object continues to exist for us. We see objects in the world not colours and textures: 'We do not actually see a can of sliced fruit, but only see one side of the can at a time, while the existence of the rest of the can is merely assumed.' (Harman, 2007, p4)

So, the Sensual Qualities are distinct from the Sensual Object and this is true of the Real Object and its Real Qualities.

## **Real Qualities**

If we return to an object, for example a dog, that looked differently at different times of day, or if it stood at different angles, or had its hair groomed differently, even if all these surface-effects were stripped away it would still be an individual dog, different to other dogs. Working again with Husserl, Harman claims that we are able to intuit that is an individual due to some eidetic features we cannot quite grasp. (Harman, 2011b, p28) This cognition means that there must be qualities that are withdrawn as the Real Object is. Harman labels these the Real Qualities of an object. He knows that they must exist as individual dogs, or other objects, exist.

The key difference with Sensual Qualities is they require a beholder; someone to notice the dog has its hair groomed differently, whereas the real qualities ensure the existence of different dogs should no beholders exist. (Harman, 2012, p6)

## **The Fourfold: A Summary**

To recap; as we have seen Harman borrows a lot from phenomenology, most frequently from Husserl and Heidegger, whilst making clear that they both make the mistake of prioritising the world of the human mind.

He critiques Husserl for his idealism; for leaving all objects as intentional, as existing only in the mind of their observer, for Harman the objects are real, are 'out there' but only their intentional (or sensual) versions, are available to us or other objects.

Harman critiques Heidegger for limiting his famous tool-analysis to just inanimate objects as it is all objects that contain a withdrawn and a revealed aspect, and likewise for not giving beingness to all things.

Despite the world being full of Real Objects, these Real Objects only ever encounter the Sensual Object or Sensual Qualities of another object. To give an example, if I am the Real Object, then the rest of the world is withdrawn from me, what I actually see of it is the Sensual Objects that it contains. These are the Sensual Profiles of the hidden Real Objects, thrust out in the Sensual world. The tree I see is a Sensual tree, the frog, a Sensual frog, and how they vary in appearance, how the light changes the appearance and aspect of the tree are because of its Sensual Qualities. But it is the same for the Real Frog which only encounters a Sensual tree or Sensual version of myself and the Real tree and Sensual frog etc.

Harman often relies on a volcanic metaphor to illuminate this distinction, the Real Object and its Qualities are the magma that flows beneath the Earth's surface, the lava the Sensual Object and its Qualities when they appear to us.

But furthermore, the Real Object is also withdrawn from its own Qualities, both Real and Sensual, as these Qualities might have no relation to one another; for instance, the Real Table might be red and aluminium but the Quality that is the tensile strength of the metal does not have the Quality of redness. But the contrary is true, they can contain elements that may have no bearing on the Real Object as we can paint the table blue and it would still be the same table.

## **Ontography**

Within the Fourfold there are a number of possible relationships that might occur between the profiles. Harman classes the study of these as Ontography. I have worked through these with a diagram in Appendix One as it is not directly relevant to the study.

But there is one of the relations that proves crucial to us. This is the one that occurs between a Real Object and its Sensual Qualities, it is how Harman explains how change can occur within the metaphysics he has defined. He calls this relation 'Space'. (Harman, 2011b, p100-101)

Harman uses this relation to explain what might have been a problem for his ontology; how all these withdrawn autonomous units interact. When a Real Object fuses with its Sensual Qualities, what occurs is Allure. This is when we catch a rare glimpse of the Real Object, this is an aesthetic process according to Harman and indeed does occur in artworks. I will explain this process in detail and like Harman with reference to metaphor, in Chapter Three.

## **Conclusion**

So, following the philosophical investigation outlined in this chapter we are cognisant of the formation and structure of Harman's ontology. I have shown that objects are the root of his philosophy and how, if we seek to reduce them, by over, under or duo-mining their existence we are unable to account for their specificity or influence. Through analysis of the influence of Heidegger and

Husserl we have a framework for understanding Harman's concepts of emergence and withdrawal.

I have yet to reveal in detail how exactly Harman accounts for change, but as Harman finds this explanation within artworks and artwork encounters it makes more sense for the moment to detour into art writing and examine it through the prism of Object Oriented Ontology.

Moreover, as we also want to analyse when writing about an artwork fails, it is germane to look at these fallacies in detail, so we might avoid falling into the same trap. From this analysis I will develop a methodology for better writing about painting, and a formula for capturing the sensorial experience of an artwork, that which I defined in the introduction as its singular echo.

## Chapter Two: Painting, an OOO account

### Abstract

In this chapter I will show how writing on painting and writing about painting often serve to overmine or undermine what Harman might term the object-quality of specific paintings and what I call the singular echo. I split them into three categories: The Undermining Artist, The Overmining Critic, and The Duomining Theorist. In this section I critique over contextualisation, but also the opposite move that provides a straight-forward description of artworks.

Following the examples given in the introduction we can conclude that the visual is seen to be of a different conceptual order to language. This is a valid insight, as, (and as I've already articulated through analysis of Harman,) all objects are withdrawn – each making-up its own 'order', if you will. So, the issue of how to 'account' for any one object in another order, which means in this case; how to write about painting, is vexed.

This chapter examines the different solutions that are proffered to this problem and explains why or how they are inadequate.

That the issue of describing painting is vexed, is understood to mean that the painting is *ineffable*. There are two ways of dealing with this ineffability. Firstly, artists and writers simply don't try to describe the appeal of a work, they ignore the singular echo. Or secondly, the 'different order' of painting, is taken to mean that all we can do is describe a work, with a focus on material – including colour, surface, etc - and painterly effects – including facture for example. But in looking for content greater than the materiality of the work, another group, say critics or theorists, commit the error of over-interpretation, (Sontag, 1964) The singular echo is lost behind their own fallacious construal of what else the work might signify.

I identify a vicious circle in relation to these methods, terming it the analytical roundabout. A link between this roundabout and the popularity of Speculative Realism is posited.

I conduct this analysis of writing about art through the lens of Harman's ontology because, if it also undermines, overmines and duomines its subject, something that's Harman's philosophy avoids, might we transpose Harman's solution for avoiding these traps onto the problem so as to provide a template for better writing about painting?

### Introduction

In this chapter we will overlay Harman's understanding of over/undermining onto the problematic of writing about painting. To begin with it would be germane to look back to the four key encounters presented in the introduction.

- 1) The encountering of something (stimuli) I think should be painted
- 2) The act of making a painting of that stimuli
- 3) The encounter with an artwork (spectating)
- 4) Writing a text about an artwork

This chapter's focus is writing for art so deals primarily with Encounter 4. As we shall see below Harman is attracted to art as template for philosophy as, according to him, it never over or undermines its subject or at least the object it is representing. Following this we can say that in Encounter 2 when as an artist I am painting the stimuli I cannot over and undermine the object I am representing. An understanding of Encounters, 1 and 3 is also possible through Harman's philosophy, and will be explicated in Chapter Three.

Following the previous chapter, we have seen that contemporary thought tends to paraphrase objects away from their essences. They are either over or undermined or both simultaneously as is the case when they are duomined. We might ask if this is the same with the art object?

Actually, Harman ties his philosophy very closely to art and the aesthetic. At the end of the Third Table text, (that I introduced in Chapter One,) Harman concludes that art offers a way to describe objects without paraphrasing them. It is artists who can provide us with the closest thing to the Third Table, the real table.

‘On the one hand art does not function by dissolving white whales, mansions, rafts, apples, guitars, and windmills, into their subatomic underpinnings... ...On the other hand they also do not seek the first table, as if the arts merely replicated the objects of everyday life or sought to create effects on us... ...Instead, there is the attempt to establish objects deeper than the features through which they are announced, or allude to objects that cannot quite be made present.’ (Harman, 2012b, p14)

That is to say, they are not providing a scientific theory to describe the table, the second of Eddington's tables. But nor are they providing the first of these two tables, the table of the Humanities. For Harman art and aesthetics are special because they are able to reach deeper than other forms of knowledge, getting closer to the hidden reality of things.

In fact, on numerous occasions Harman endorses an aesthetic approach to philosophy. (Harman, 2012b) This can be seen as paradigmatic of his ontology. He believes that the artwork is a form of knowledge that is irreducible but nevertheless accessible as knowledge / a knowledge-provider. As he has it;

‘Works of art and architecture are misunderstood if we reduce them downward to their physical components or upward to their socio-political effects, despite occasional attempts within those disciplines to do just that.’ (Harman, 2016b, p12)

I think however that we can say with some conviction that there are more than just occasional attempts to reduce them downward or upward and this is the focus of this chapter. Art is often over-interpreted to use Sontag's terminology.

‘Interpretation ... presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy. The situation is that for some reason a text has become unacceptable; yet it cannot be discarded. Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can’t admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning. However far the interpreters alter the text ... they must claim to be reading off a sense that is already there.’ (Sontag, 1964, p6)

What Sontag has identified as over-interpretation is coherent with Harman’s notion of a description of an object taking us away from the essence of it. Instinctively we think we know that, for instance, writing about a particular artwork missed the nub of it, but in this chapter, we will answer with specifics the following question; How does art writing over, under or duomine the art object?

In answering this question, we will expand upon the three fallacies: Biographical, Descriptive and Contextual that were referenced in the introduction. Though there is not a perfect synchronicity it is useful to think of these categories in the terms that Harman has just outlined and helps us identify when writing about painting will Undermine, Overmine or Duomine the artwork.

We will incorporate a third meter, a text of James Elkins that I believe has useful parallels with my categories and the reductionist strategies identified by Harman but is art-specific. The essay of Elkins is *Thoughts on the State and Future of the Image* (2003). In this essay Elkins gives three reasons why we might want to ask what an image is? To illustrate how disparate our notions of it might be, he brackets these three reasons into three fields within the arts; the studio art environment, art criticism / art history / art theory; and visual studies.

In combining our diagnosis with that of Harman and Elkins we will divide the analysis that follows into three sections: The Undermining Artist, The Overmining Critic, and The Duomining Theorist. Though obviously each actor can commit each reductive strategy, artists overmine, theorist undermine etc. I have bracketed them this way as it reflects the most common occurrence of the problem.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As a brief, but important, aside.

In his essay James Elkins offers the apology that visual culture theorists might make, that perhaps post-colonial sensitivity has made them reluctant to suggest a generalised empirical account of how the visual operates for all. (Elkins, 2003, p67) He says, ‘it may also have to do with a sensitivity to the way concepts are culturally constructed, which involves a mistrust towards trans-historical philosophic conceptualizations.’ (Elkins, 2003, p67)

I am in accordance with Elkins on this, but we might wonder if Harman would not be. In *Immaterialism* (2016) he appears to be bemoaning criticism of these very conceptualisations when he says the theory contained within the book ‘cuts against the grain of fashions that lament the ‘great man’ theory of

## The Undermining Artist

In the case of *The Undermining Artist* the work that is analysed is explained in terms of its materiality, and in the case of a painting this is via reference to its

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history and the Romantic conception of genius,' as if anything spawned by Romanticism were inherently false.' (Harman, 2016b, p55)

It is precisely the 'great man' that Linda Nochlin laments in her canonical essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (Nochlin, 1971) We could mobilise this essay when thinking through the biographical fallacy, I branded in the introduction. In this text she identifies the misconception or 'the naive idea that art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms.' (Nochlin, 1971, p147)

In fact, she would seem to conceive of the work of art as this study does when she separates it from categorisation in the following passage;

'The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, or free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation. The language of art is, more materially, embodied in paint and line on canvas or paper, in stone or clay or plastic or metal it is neither a sob story nor a confidential whisper.' (Nochlin, 1971, p147)

I am accordance with Nochlin here and am careful to stress that any re-reading of Linda Nochlin doesn't imply that I disagree with a feminist revision of art history. Politically I am in agreement with her . But we will see that in *Seurat's Grande Jatte: An Anti-Utopian Allegory*, I think she misreads the work of Georges Seurat, in subjecting it to a deconstructivist analysis, and she seems to contradict some of the strategies she disavows above.

In this situation Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provides succour. In the introduction to *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003) she is careful to say that her work is not an attempt to devalue the work of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida in critiquing the heteronormalizing nature of language, (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p4-9) but could be read alongside it as a companion that provides 'a relative lightening of the epistemological demand on essential truth,' (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p6)

She uses the term *beside* for how she would situate her own critical enquiry, *beside* as opposed to *beneath*, *behind* or *beyond*, as it implies instead a planar relation (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p8) and therefore fitting for an investigation based on a flat ontology to appropriate.

As the title *Touching Feeling* suggests, like us Kosofsky Sedgwick is asking for a less constant textual engagement with the subject, and instead something more haptic, spatial and intuitive. And though we won't be following her in taking a Foucauldian position for our analyses, we can follow her in stating that this is not a project to displace other important critical practices but to perhaps provide detail where they have generalised. Like her I want to deepen our knowledge of those engagements outside of political analyses, as she says here;

'to address aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even verbal form alongside others that do, rather than submit to the apparent common sense that requires a strict separation between the two and usually implies an ontological privileging of the former.' (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p6)

So, when Nochlin is identifying the impact of class system Seurat found himself in, on his work, we can recognise the sincerity of the gesture and the importance of the work. But want a more nuanced appreciation of the sensual impact of his work. There is justification for both forms.

surface, the manner in which the paint has been applied, and in only doing this fails to account for the overall experience of the painting.

In the first instance it will be useful to concentrate on one artist to exemplify these 'reduction' strategies. The artist chosen is Georges Seurat, though it might be considered something of an 'open goal' for undermining to choose an artist who is famous for Pointillism; what we could call a 'particle-based' painting technique. And as expected we encounter undermining in the following two examples, the first from an exhibition catalogue;

'Impressionist brushwork, which had made use of open flecks and allowed for spontaneity, now appears disciplined, subsumed into the regime of the colored dot and its strict sequencing. A sober precision, which includes even geometry, shape and line, is combined with the depiction of intangible and yet very potent light.' (Boehm, 2009, p87)

The painting here is undermined as its style is described as 'disciplined' and 'sober' and though we are told that an 'intangible' light is captured, no attempt is made to describe this light. The description of that which is intangible is what we are hoping to find in art writing.

We can find our second example of undermining in the writing of Bridget Riley, this following excerpt is concerned with a preparatory painted study for one of Seurat's best-known works, *La Grand Jatte*:

'Seurat uses the three primaries of light: red-orange, green, and blue-violet for his canvas. Such honing-in demanded a greater precision in colour application, and so the pointillist touch arrives. The preparatory work... makes it quite easy to follow the evolution from the freely hatched brush-stroke, still used to lay in the underpainting, to the dot, that uninflected and non-referential mark. It is easy to see that the manner in which it draws no attention to itself while carrying out a task discretely would have appealed to Seurat.' (Riley, 1992, p178)

Both these examples undermine the paintings they are referring to. That is not to say they are bad pieces of writing, or even uninteresting, but I believe that they are predicated on the notion that all we can describe about the effect of a painting or an artwork is the matter that forms them, that visual sensation cannot be paraphrased but simply explained. The singular echo of an artwork is not found in describing its style or how the materials have been applied.

Undermining is what we called in the introduction *The Descriptive Fallacy*. It also chimes with the reason for wanting to define an image that Elkins posits in the category studio art environment.

'In the studio art environment, it is often assumed that the visual exists in a cognitive realm separate from language, logic, and mathematics.'  
(Elkins, 2003, p66)

Elkins is referring here to the brusque dismissal of textual analysis that many artists make, the argument follows this line: because the visual is in a different



cognitive realm to the other modes of thought, why bother *defining* its appeal – in language, writing, etc. They have surrendered to the idea that the appeal of a painting is ineffable so they don't try and describe a painting's appeal. This fits with the fallacy I have described as Descriptive, they undermine its appeal by describing it in quotidian language; this red shape is there, or in painter's jargon as Bridget Riley does again in the following quotation, herself relying heavily of art critic Félix Fénéon's *undermining* of Seurat;

'Here already are the five colour sources of his method which Félix Fénéon listed later: the 'solar orange' for sunlight, and its 'complementary', strong blue in the shade; greens and yellows as the 'local colours' of the vegetation; fleeting reds and violets as 'ambient complementary colours'; a small portion of 'reflections projected by neighbouring objects', and a great deal of those inflected half-lights explained as 'the feeble portion of coloured light that penetrates beyond the surface and is reflected after having been modified by partial absorption'.' (Riley, 1992, p176)

This is interesting to read as a painter, and I can think about how Seurat creates the visual effects that he does but it, again, fails to account for the overall experience of the painting,<sup>7</sup> And I don't think that we need to accept that the singular echo of the artwork can't be described – Harman offers a solution here, one that is the task of this thesis to explicate.

As noted it is not only artist-writers, or artists in studio discussion, who do this, critics also prompt the undermining attitude, as David Joselit does when he says the following;

'Here is a strange fact, which is both so obvious and so threatening to art-historical analysis that it is habitually overlooked: every artwork is indescribable. And since we can neither grasp a painting in language nor exhaust it in experience, how can we assign it meaning?' (Joselit, 2016, p11)

The problem is that I believe this can lead to a quasi-mysticism about the ineffability of art and though I can understand why artists want to avoid this, the method they have chosen, that is describing the work's physical appearance, is a form of undermining, one which is normally a response to the challenge of withdrawal (ineffability, untranslatability, etc.), but this is an inadequate response. Atomising art in this way denies the encounter that is the whole object, the singular echo of the painting.

The following taken from a Hilton Kramer essay, *Seurat, one hundred years later*, (1991), (though not by him,) demonstrates this ably:

'Seurat knew many things, the sacred laws of common sense, which we neglect no doubt because they are too simple.

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<sup>7</sup> This might elsewhere be termed the gestalt but gestalt theory is a 'red herring' as this will undermine the artwork encounter; separating it into its constituent parts.

That it is not instinct that composes, but intellect; that instinct—genius—proposes and the lucid mind disposes, composes, translates the impulse, the imperfectly formed, sketchy need that we call inspiration....

A painter may intellectualize, and Seurat was not averse to doing so. But, ultimately, we know that certain works are possessed of that radiance, that sublimity, those resonances that no formula can measure, explain or dissect, but that we feel, that excite us, transport us, make us forget everything else. There are certain canvases by Seurat that have this magic.

—Amédée Ozenfant, in *Cahiers d'Art*, 1926

Which, as already noted, is frustrating because the implication is that we shouldn't try to write about whatever it is that provides this 'magic.' This thesis does not dispute that magic exists, that there is a singular echo emitted by the artwork, rather we dispute that this is ineffable.

And, if we think through Harman and how he explains causation in his ontology we can approach this problem from a different angle.

### **The Overmining Critic**

The overmining critic can operate in a number of manners but what links these manners is that the writing ignores the singular echo of the artwork and places it instead in a larger schema. We begin this section with the writing of Isabella Graw trying to define the nature of painting as a medium. Later in the chapter we shall see Heidegger making the same error, perpetuating what Sontag calls a 'highly dubious theory' in *Against Interpretation*:

'Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories.' (Sontag, 1964, p10)

Contemporary critic and curator Isabella Graw has tried to define what makes a painting a painting. This is perhaps surprising, given the contemporary context in which it has been written, if we look back at the Peter Osborne quote used in the introduction, contemporary critics have eschewed notions of medium specificity. (Osborne, 2013, p3)

To be clear Graw is aware of the dangers of medium specificity, and she calls her own concept a 'medium-unspecific notion of painting.' (Graw, 2012, p45) Nevertheless, she has still chosen to advance a definition on the assumption that paintings are different from other art-forms, other 'mediums.' She wants to,

'try to develop a medium-unspecific notion of painting that is nevertheless able to capture its residual distinctness even under the conditions that led to its diffuse boundaries.' (Graw, 2012, p45)

She works toward this definition across two books. *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas* followed by *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition.* Across the two texts she mobilises semiotics to understand an indexicality inherent in painting: (Graw, 2012 & 2016) That a painting shows the trace of its author. In the first text she posits that painting is 'a form of production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized' (Graw, 2012, p45) Following Hegel she claims that;

'only in painting are aesthetics and subjectivity strongly interconnected... In my opinion, the unique dynamic developed by paint on a surface already provides the groundwork for the understanding that, here, we are also dealing with a model of subjectivity in the sense of an independent life.' (Graw, 2016, p63)

This doesn't mean that the painting then has powers to 'think' away from the artist who creates it, we need to be more precise than that. A painting offers a viewpoint of the world in both senses of the word. Firstly, we could say, after Vasari, that a painting is a window onto the world, and there is little questionable in the assertion that painting offers this kind of viewpoint. Through Graw we see that we need to think beyond this, that this window also represents a subjective viewpoint, and we are under its influence as we look out of it. The painting is in effect telling us what it thinks. We are familiar with the idea that a novel may contain characters that represent views different to those of the reader and writer, but the objectness of a painting seems to give it more agency. She claims that a 'Painting is a highly-valuable quasi person.' (Graw, 2016) She is cognisant that performance art might seem to be more linked to the artist responsible as they are obviously visible when the artwork is viewed. But painting is different as an object is produced that contains the supposed trace of the author,

'While paintings seem to somewhat contain the artist, they can't be reduced to this person. What prevents the reduction of this painterly product to its maker is its specific materiality... Both product and person signify one another but they don't collapse into one another.' (Graw, 2016, p91)

And though she is clear that it is not actually possible to really find the artist in the work it is possible to make the viewer think that it is possible, to fabricate this effect,

'Painting is, in other words, a highly differentiated language that consists of a number of techniques, methods and artifices, which allow for the fabrication of the impression of the author's quasi-presence *as an effect.*' (Graw, 2016, p93, her emphasis)

So, in her identification of the 'specific materiality' of the painting distinct from its context, we have found resonances of Object philosophy. It is also there in the almost animistic agency she gives to painting. Moreover, there are also echoes of Graham Harman in her identification of irreducible components that make up a painting. She is talking precisely about the absent artist who has left their mark on the surface: 'In other words, painting is a product that is

saturated with what one imagines to be the person of the artist but it can't be reduced to this person.' (Graw, 2016, p93)

She is very certain that the mark of the painter-author is there, even if it is a mark of self-erasure, and gives the examples of Wade Guyton and Gerhard Richter's squeegee abstracts. As she has it,

'One could establish the following rule: the more negation there is of handwriting, the more this negation will be considered to be the handwriting of the artist.' (Graw, 2016, p96)<sup>8</sup>

But we can conclude that in Harman's terms both of Graw's texts *overmine*. There is much to recommend Graw's attempts to delimit a concept of painting. But in doing so she undermines whichever painting she has chosen as exemplar of her theory as her theory is about painting not a painting, it is about painting as a medium.

If we were to reword the first quotation of hers we used, it is the distinctness of **a** painting that this study is concerned with. The singular echo of a painting and how that affects the viewer.

This is an accordance with Elkins' second reason, that the fields of art history, theory and criticism tend to work with received opinions of what an image is. (Elkins, 2003, p66) In addition, Elkins claims art history ignores much of what is visible about a painting. It should be interested in the whole surface, but instead;

'the discipline of art history tends not to notice small surface details, textures, marks, and facture unless those things have overall significance (as they do, for example, in Impressionism), or unless they add to representations, iconographic elements, or otherwise legible semiotic elements... In other words, a lot of what makes any given painting a painting is not articulated in art historical texts. In that sense, the image enters the text of art history as a radically simplified object.' (Elkins, 2003, p66)

And though Graw has attempted to avoid this by referencing the technique of the artist, in doing so she has missed the painting as specific object. The surface of the painting, the painting-as-object is being *overmined* so that it may be described in a way that ignores some of its elements. By explaining her concept of painting as medium by referring to the squeegee technique of Richter as his recognisable 'signature', she has inadvertently concluded that every painting that Richter has created using the squeegee is interchangeable. The singular echo of an artwork is not found in the equipment used to create it.

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<sup>8</sup> As we shall see in more detail shortly this would put her in conflict with Linda Nochlin's views on Seurat. Nochlin says; 'For Seurat, with the dot, resolutely and consciously removed himself as a unique being projected into the work by means of a personal handwriting. He himself is absent from his stroke.' (Nochlin, 1989, p174)

## The Duomining Theorist

Returning to Seurat and Nochlin we find an example of what Harman calls duomining in an essay of hers, *Seurat's La Grande Jatte: An Anti-Utopian Allegory*. In this text she finds

‘Seurat’s method would seem to allegorize modern techniques of mass production, and to produce thereby effects of distancing far from either Impressionist and Expressionist signifiers of subjectivity and involvement in art production or from the harmonious generalization of surface characteristics of classical modes of representation.’ (Nochlin, 1989, p181)

Nochlin is duomining the painting here by referring to the pointillist technique of its construction purely as effect, that is to an expression of separation between the viewer and subject of the painting. By reducing the painting to its particle-based method, she is undermining it, while simultaneously overmining by claiming Seurat is echoing the nascent industrialisation taking place in contemporary (to him) society through usage of said method.

This is problematic as the sensual aspect of the work is ignored instead it is bundled into a sociohistorical reading of the work, in Nochlin’s account the transportive potential of the painting is ignored, its visual construction and effects are either taken for granted or perhaps thought of as ineffable. In fact, when we look at a painting by Seurat we can’t separate the way it was made from the whole object that is the painting and the experience of it. As Sontag says,

‘Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there.’ (Sontag, 1965, p13)

I believe we need to spend longer thinking about this ‘sensory experience,’ what I have termed the singular echo. Nochlin takes the same approach as previously when she describes the way the dots are in fact referents to:

‘Rather, in these machine-turned profiles, these regularized dots we may discover coded references to modern science and to modern industry with its mass production; to the department store with its cheap and multiple copies; to the mass press with its endless pictorial reproductions; in short, a critical sense of modernity embodied in sardonic, decorative invention and in the emphatic, even overemphatic, contemporaneity of costumes and accoutrements.’ (Nochlin, 1989, p173)

Here Nochlin has taken us far beyond *La Grand Jatte*, the painter’s technique has been instrumentalised into a critique of modernistic alienation, the sensory experience has been lost.

In the same essay Nochlin praises Meyer Schapiro’s writing on Seurat. Calling his writing ‘perhaps the most perceptive article written about *La Grande Jatte*,’ (Nochlin, 1989, p174.) But in this piece Schapiro emphasises that Seurat’s lower middle-class background in the embryonic industrial society that was Paris at

the time lead him to his rational or sober painting technique. (Nochlin, 1989, p174) The relevance of this to the sensory experience of looking at La Grand Jatte, is limited, in fact it distracts.

In conclusion we can say that those fallacies that we referred to, in the introduction as Contextual or Biographical, Harman would class as overmining or duominig. In trying to situate the work within a historical or conceptual context, or a personal history of the artist the writer misses the specificity of the work as it becomes a signifier of something larger. I would bracket 'The Biographical Fallacy' as failing for similar reasons; making the work fit into the author's life story rather than analysing the painting as is. This is, of course, a reiteration of Barthes' famous critique *Death of the Author* (1967), at least in part.

'The Descriptive Fallacy', as is now clear, is an instance of undermining: That by describing the brush marks or the use of colour we are closer to the piece. Though the formal qualities of a painting are what we admire about it, what draws us to it, describing these does not translate into an account of the experience of the painting. Reducing the object that is the painting to its physical constituent parts brings us no closer to the 'real' painting, we simply undermine it. But committing the 'Contextual Fallacy' and explaining how the painting fits into a movement or epoch, or overmining, the painting, leaves us similarly adrift of the singular echo, the 'real' painting.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Analytical Roundabout**

As our earlier aside hinted, these strategies of reduction (over, under, and duo mining) tend to occur in reaction to one another. Particularly if we follow them in a specific order.

If we start off with overmining; a writer committing the biographical fallacy by describing what a painter was experiencing in their life at the time they were making a work as if that could explain it, (whereas they were simply trying to make the best painting they could at the time.) Critics felt they needed to rectify this problem, Roland Barthes wrote in *Death of the Author* about how criticism can distract itself with biographical details,

'Criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us.' (Barthes, 1967, p143)

Barthes could be writing against Meyer Schapiro here, when Schapiro says 'One misses in all this both a personal sense of the expression and of van Gogh's feelings of 'rejection' by his own parents and by his learned teachers who had to

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<sup>9</sup> Further application of these fallacious forms of art criticism is discussed in Appendix One, ii with particular reference to Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* and the responses to it by Meyer Schapiro and Jacques Derrida.

come to doubt his fitness as a Christian preacher and missionary.’ (Schapiro, 1994, p149)

But in looking away from the author and instead towards the art object qua art, then we find writers thinking about the nature of art, the environment of the artist. And then as Simon O’Sullivan says in the book used to define encounters in the introduction, this leads onto failure by the following means, ‘That in thinking about art, in reading the art object, we missed that which art does best.’ (O’Sullivan, 2006, p40) It is O’Sullivan’s opinion that this missing of what art does best, which we have called its singular echo, can largely be explained by either; ‘Marxism (or the ‘Social History of Art’) and the propensity to historically explain, or interpret, art through recourse to its moment of production.’ Or ‘deconstruction (or the ‘New Art History’) and the propensity to stymie manoeuvres such as the first, whilst still inhabiting their general conceptual framework.’ (O’Sullivan, 2006, p40)<sup>10</sup>

Both factors result in the artwork simply being a tool for another reading, as Sontag puts it in *On Style*, this type of criticism ‘in effect treats the work of art as a statement being made in the form of a work of art.’ (Sontag, 1965, p21, her emphasis)

That is to say, the critic is in effect instrumentalising the artwork to match their own agenda. But this isn’t the same as the way an artist would look at the work, as she says;

‘Such a treatment has little to do with what actually happens when a person possessing some training and aesthetic sensibility looks at a work of art appropriately. A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world.’ (Sontag, 1965, p21)

In a different essay, *Against Interpretation*, she says; ‘Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.’ (Sontag, 1964 p14) I believe it is because of the over-contextualisation with biographical or sociohistorical details that leads some to respond with a prosaic description of the effects of the artwork. What might be described as a humble formalist reportage that knows it is impossible to capture the sensations of the painting. The undermining artist is a stance adopted *in response* to the overmining critic or the duoming theorist. The latter’s textualisation of artwork has frustrated artists who see the materiality of art as fundamental to its nature and distinct from language. The following extract from an essay by abstract painter Alan Gouk gives a sense of that frustration:

‘Painting is not ‘structured like a language’, nor does sculpture share a syntax with language, nor does music. Hans Keller in his last book

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<sup>10</sup> The Schapiro text(s) on Heidegger that are examined in Appendix One, part ii could be thought of as axiomatic of the ‘Social History of Art’ reason, and Derrida’s response to Heidegger, Schapiro, and Van Gogh’s shoes of ‘New Art History’. As O’Sullivan says, ‘We might say that with the first factor there is an appeal to origins as final explanation, whilst with the second the very notion of an origin is put under erasure.’ (O’Sullivan, 2006, p40)

Criticism, says that music is not a language since it is cannot be translated (and as yet no written language can be deciphered unless it has links to another known language). Therefore structuralist and post-structuralist linguistic theory and literary criticism are irrelevant to the analysis of painting. All figures of speech, and the metaphoric, metonymy, synecdoche, trope etc., – indeed meta-anything, should be banished from critical discourse as a gross misapplication of language if applied to visual art... ..The allure of subjectivity biased, obscurantist, pseudo-scientific French literary theory for nice-but-dim art theorists has wreaked untold damage to the tenor of art-critical discourse.’ (Gouk, 2013)

It is expressed more fluently and less indignantly by Sontag in *Against Interpretation*;

‘None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it did. From now to the end of consciousness we are stuck with the task of defending art. We can only quarrel with one or other means of defense. Indeed, we have an obligation to overthrow any means of defending and justifying art which becomes particularly obtuse or onerous or insensitive to contemporary needs and practice.’ (Sontag, 1964, p4-5)

So, it would seem when in front of the ineffability of the artwork the spectator qua writer is presented with a choice, though all choices are predicated on this ineffability, and take it as a given. The critic as art-historian chooses to write about the biography of the artist, thinking that “perhaps if we know what the artist was experiencing when this work was made we can assume that this is what generates the singular echo. If the artist was getting divorced then it is the divorce that gives this work its appeal.”

The theorist, rightly disappointed by the absurdity of this conclusion, and uninterested in the emotional life of the artist instead looks for a more grounded analysis to accompany the artwork, and finds it in politics. But this again misses the singular echo, takes its ineffability for granted.

The artist, understanding the world haptically, is frustrated by all these words, the textual interpretations that cloud the very thing that appeals about the artwork, namely its materiality, chooses to describe that instead, and lists the facture and decisions taken by the artist. But again, this misses what appeals about the artwork, that which is ‘ineffable,’ the artist claims that there is just something magical about it. Faced with this magic, the biographer looks for a moment within the life of the artist... and the analytical roundabout continues to turn. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In performing this critical analysis, we have provided an answer to the question raised in the first chapter; namely why Speculative Realism has become so popular in Art Schools. Keeping the analytical roundabout in mind it is easy to see how Art Schools being ‘early-adopters’ of Speculative Realism. New Materialism can be thought of as a sub-category of Speculative Realism, and the Materialism of its title



## Conclusion

As we have found, there is an accord between Harman's diagnosis of the ontological failings of contemporary philosophy and my own disappointment with the textual analysis of painting.

We have seen through the concept of 'the analytical roundabout' that these textual analyses begot one another, with each one seeking to ameliorate the failings of the one preceding it, but each one missing that which specifically appeals about the artwork, remaining out of reach of the analysis.

But there is cause for optimism here; that if Harman proffers a method for understanding painting as an OOO object, if I can uncover how withdrawn objects communicate within his ontology I can follow him and speculate on how the withdrawn painting can be communicated with. From this I can delineate a method for interpreting paintings, including writing about painting. Doing so must neither undermine nor overmine them, and then this methodology can be transcribed and used as a template for better writing about painting.

It is in art that Harman finds the solution to this aforementioned lacuna in his ontology, how objects communicate and to account for change, specifically, in his take on spectatorship. This is the subject of the next chapter.

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emphasises its tactility and tangibility. It is a return to the haptic after the cerebral nature of post structuralism, this is explicit in the introduction of *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts* edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt who like Elkins attribute some blame to cultural studies, 'The framing of art as a primarily social and ideological in nature occurred within the broader context of the rise of cultural studies, post structuralism and postmodernism.' (Bolt, 2013, p4)

Art was now Cultural Production in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, (1993), art was now a product of 'social discursive practices.' (Bolt, 2013, p4) 'Thus, through the colonization of the arts by cultural theory, arts' very materiality has disappeared into the textual, the linguistic and the discursive. According to this conception, art is constructed in and through language. There is nothing outside of discourse and language is its vehicle.' (Bolt, 2013, p4)

Or as O'Sullivan puts it, 'it might be argued that this radicality has in some cases become a new kind of orthodoxy and that its conceptual resources are less relevant to many modern and contemporary practices that operate away from this textual paradigm.' (O'Sullivan, 2006, p4)

## **Chapter Three**

# **The Spectator and OOO**

### **Abstract**

In this chapter I think through Spectatorship via the prism of OOO, debunking the notion of an artwork without a spectator that was one interpretation of how art might operate in an OOO universe. Likewise, a separate interpretation; that of the modernistic spectator of Greenberg and Fried is revealed as equally fallacious. I incorporate Harman's writing on Greenberg and comparisons Harman has made between Greenberg and Heidegger. I examine Fried using another writer on art and OOO, Robert Jackson. The flaws in the notion of a post-Modern or relational spectator are also outlined. Following this I explicate how the spectator in OOO really operates, following Harman I do this with reference to Jose Ortega y Gasset and his essay on the metaphor. The crux of which is that when we read a metaphor we become the metaphorical agent within it. So, when we encounter an artwork we fuse with it, try to become it. This interaction takes place within a third object; the object that is the artwork encounter. Based on this revelation I am able to explain Harman's concept of vicarious causation. What is crucial, despite what one might expect when dealing with an ontology of withdrawn autonomous units, is the thing that encounters them. In the case of a painting that is the spectator. This simultaneously completes a gap in Harman's ontology, in accounting for change, and gives instruction on how we might write about the singular echo of an artwork; by writing instead about the third object.

### **Introduction**

At the end of the last chapter we were trapped in a cycle of dissatisfying art criticism, that I termed the analytical roundabout, when trying to describe the 'draw' of an individual painting. On this 'roundabout' avoiding one type of criticism meant we trapped ourselves in another, to avoid overmining in a biographical fashion meant overmining or duoming through contextual means, avoiding both of these meant undermining the painting with prosaic description.

But we can use the philosophy of Harman to get off this roundabout. This not only assists us in our aim of writing about the singular echo of an artwork, but also provides a novel approach to a discussion of spectatorship.

### **A Contemporary Art Without Spectators**

In wanting to push beyond 'correlationism' – that is believing that humanity can only think what it can experience (as explained in Chapter One) speculative realism and its derivatives have tended to be bracketed as posthumanism as they are philosophising about a reality beyond humanity or without humanity or

after humanity. Though this is understandable it is fallacious as beyond humanity and without humanity have very different implications.<sup>12</sup>

However, this is far from the case and, perhaps alarmed by this trend, Harman has used his more recent publications to dissuade people from this opinion; most explicitly in his 2016 book *Immaterialism*:

‘Yet it is often wrongly assumed that OOO, with its focus on objects, must reach those objects by expelling or exterminating humans. Many of the misleading questions addressed to OOO make this same false assumption: ‘What would an art without humans be like?’; ‘What would an architecture without humans look like?’ The point is not to subtract humans from any given situation but to focus on the way that humans are themselves ingredients in a symbiosis rather than just privileged observers looking on from the outside.’ (Harman, 2016, p54)

So here we see that Harman makes the viewer vital to an artwork, we needn’t imagine the OOO artwork as a viewer-less piece. But more than this, according to Harman, it has to be a viewer cognizant they are looking at art, revealed in an interview with Christoph Cox and Jenny Jaskey, Harman is pushed further on the point of whether the artwork ‘works’ without a spectator and he reveals that in OOO the artwork doesn’t even exist as such if the spectator isn’t interested in it, we shouldn’t even think of it as an artwork when it isn’t being observed.

‘The question is whether an artwork continues to be an artwork when no one is looking at it. My instinct is to say ‘absolutely not,’ that its reality is generated not only by the presence of an observer, but even an observer who is capable of understanding it.’ (Harman, 2015 p105)

Clearly then the idea of an artwork just existing ‘artworkedly’ if you will, is not possible in a philosophy such as Harman’s, requiring as it does not only a viewer, but a viewer who understands they are looking at art. But this ‘capable’ audience leads to another misconception, one that imagines that because of its emphasis on objecthood, OOO would follow Clement Greenberg and Michael

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<sup>12</sup> As mentioned in footnote 5 in Chapter One we might consider dOCUMENTA 13 in 2012 as a ‘high-watermark’ for a post-humanist viewpoint within the arts, the director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev explicitly said that the focus of the show was the ‘question as to whether we can imagine a universe that’s less anthropocentric, a world of thought and active life that’s not based especially on humans.’ (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012) Alongside Harman other writers who submitted notebooks, included Karen Barad and Donna Haraway and there were artworks such as artist Pierre Huyge’s Untilled.

Untilled included a natural environment that replenished through processes of decomposition and fertilisation. As might be expected, these natural processes took place whether or not there was a viewer present: ‘Events such as pollination and compostation continue to happen whether or not I choose to view or participate in the exhibited work.’ (Weir, 2013, p29)

Andy Weir wrote about the potential for artwork to exist without viewer, and Untilled can be considered the apotheosis of this position of the artwork without a spectator. Though Weir does not mention Harman directly, it might be thought that this is what an artwork inspired by OOO would look like. In an ontology in which all the real constituents are withdrawn from one another would not the work of art also exist without a spectator? ‘The viewer, however defined, makes no difference.’ (Weir, 2013, p32)

Fried and endorse what might be termed a Modernist approach to spectatorship, with a high-brow audience of connoisseurs. In fact, this isn't the case but as we shall see Harman has engaged on more than one occasion with Greenberg and Fried. He has used them to define and clarify his own position, therefore this relation is one worth examining in more detail.

## **Modernism and The Spectator**

'Who is this Spectator, also called Viewer, sometimes called the Observer, occasionally the Perceiver?' (O'Doherty, 1976, p39 – 41)

In *Inside the White Cube* Brian O'Doherty contextualises and questions the role of the spectator. At the time of writing (1976) he was primarily responding to Modernism and he critiques the architectural decisions that led to the existence of the white cube gallery space that we are so familiar with. (O'Doherty, 1976, p14) These white ideal spaces come with 'some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics.' (O'Doherty, 1976 p14) O'Doherty continues, parodying the sanctity of the space that inadvertently reifies any object within it, not just the art object.

'The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall... ..the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehouse but an esthetic conundrum.' (O'Doherty, 1976, p15)

This rarefied space, in which the (art) object is king would seem like the obvious place that an ontology of autonomous units with a withdrawn reality would be positioned. We might conflate the notion of an object with a withdrawn reality with a belief that each artwork has its own particularity, its own 'aura.' We only need read Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* to find a description of 'aura' that seems to fit with Harman's Real Objects: 'Withdrawn' objects that can never be fully accessed no matter how they are approached, their autonomy resolutely defended by Harman from paraphrasing or reduction, from undermining or overmining. ('Harman, 2011b) Artworks existing autonomously,

'The definition of aura as 'a unique manifestation of a remoteness, no matter how near it may be' ...The essence of remoteness is that it cannot be approached. Indeed, unapproachability is one of the chief qualities of the cultic image. By its very nature, it remains 'remote no matter how near'.' (Benjamin, 1936, p41)

Harman acknowledges this perceived sympathy with Modernism in an article, *Art without Relations*, published in *Art Review* in September 2014: 'In defending an art concerned with objects deeper than their relation to humans, it might seem as if we are returning to a high modernist conception of the

autonomy of the artwork.’ (Harman, 2014, p103) But this is not actually the case as we shall see, by following Harman as he distinguishes his position.

### **The Real Object of Modern Painting – Heidegger, Greenberg**

Harman begins by establishing Greenberg’s position: ‘Greenberg is viewed as the champion of formalism, of artworks sealed off from their socio-political surroundings and even from the private intentions of the artist.’ (Harman, 2014b, p251) And he praises Greenberg’s writing on many aspects, it often avoids the traps of some art criticism we saw in the previous chapter. Harman says formalism is useful in aesthetics as; ‘it preserves the artwork from being reduced to its biographical origins or its usefulness as propaganda for the favoured political views of the moment.’ (Harman, 2016, p151)

It is widely known that Clement Greenberg argued for medium specificity, he believed that, in his own words,

‘Each art had to determine through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain.’ (Greenberg, 1960, p1)

Greenberg argues that the limit of a painting’s scope is its flatness and it should revel in that flatness, rather than trying for illusory depth. This was the triumph of Modernism over its forebears, concerned as they were with realism. In Greenberg’s words,

‘Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment—were treated by the old masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly.’ (Greenberg, 1960, p2)

In this article, Harman finds equivalence between Greenberg’s position and a Heideggerian one. He does this first by using Greenberg’s antipathy to academicism as reflecting a belief in the expanded potential of the medium, rather than simply the surface on which an image, i.e. the content of the painting, is added.

‘Art avoids academicism when its content manages to *reflect* or *embody* the possibilities of its medium, rather than presenting content as an isolated figure whose ground or medium can be taken for granted.’ (Harman, 2014b, p260)

He moves on from this, allying this belief in an invisible depth within a medium with Heidegger’s concept of art outlined in the latter’s essay ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ that we analysed in depth in Appendix One, ii: ‘In other words,

despite his concern with the flatness of the canvas, there is a sense in which Greenberg is primarily interested in *depth*: in making the invisible deep conditions of any medium somehow visible in the content of the art.’ (Harman, 2014b, p260)

Harman criticises Greenberg for the same thing we saw him criticise Heidegger for, (a criticism we expanded to include Isabella Graw); that the surface of a *singular* artwork according to Greenberg and Heidegger (and Graw) is irrelevant (says Harman.)

‘For Greenberg as for Heidegger, the flat background is the same no matter what content is deployed to hint in its direction. In this respect both authors make the surface too shallow and the background too deep, with the artwork’s form conceived too holistically and its content too dismissively.’ (Harman, 2014, p105)

For Harman what we see when we look at a painting, what he would call the ‘sensual features’ of this individual art object, are what is most fundamental to it, not that it is an example of the practice of painting, but that it is ‘its own’ object, and what itself is a painting of. Harman is giving priority to what is in front of him. In his words: ‘The problem with modernist theory was not that it decontextualised art and made it too autonomous, but that it rooted autonomy in the features of the medium rather than the internal fascinations of content itself.’ (Harman, 2014, p104)

### **Michael Fried**

So, it is not the medium specificity that Harman holds as being key to the artwork, but we might wonder if it is possible to align OOO with another tenet of Modernism; the autonomy of the artwork? That is, an artwork freed from the associations and contextualisation of Postmodernist readings. Within Modernism, this is a position best exemplified by Michael Fried in his essay *Art and Objecthood*. In this text Fried argued against what he saw as art’s drift from objecthood to fluid artworks that were activated by the viewer, containing a form of user-generated content. (Jackson, 2011, p137) He lay the blame for this drift at the feet of Minimalist Art, which he described as being tainted by theatricality. By theatricality he meant it was activated or completed by the viewer’s presence:

‘I want to call attention to the utter pervasiveness – the virtual universality – of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterised as corrupted or perverted by theatre. We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace.’ (Fried, 1967, p168)

His position is neatly summarised by Robert Jackson as such;

‘Meaning and reception is not to be found within the Minimalist work itself, but instead the work operates for the beholder’s circumstance. The work can only function for beholders and is only constructed with beholders in mind. The beholder is less that which can behold and more

like a gap in a system needing to be filled, so that the aesthetic effect can properly function. The inclusion of the beholder's experience processing the artwork is integral to the artworks expression. In contrast, Fried champions artworks which fundamentally 'ignore' the role of the beholder.' (Jackson, 2011, p141)

Jackson has tried with some success in a pair of articles for *Speculations* journal to synthesise Fried into OOO and vice versa. Using *Art and Objecthood* alongside other writings by Fried, Jackson claims: 'It is my conviction that Harman's object-oriented philosophy provides the metaphysics adequate to Fried's criticism and, conversely, that Harman's philosophy warrants a radicalised Friedian approach to art.' (Jackson, 2014, p348)

As noted, this is where we would expect to find the OOO artwork. Jackson's take on Fried states that the viewer's absorption by the work is not equivalent to the nullification of the spectator, as it asserts the primacy of the object.

'For Fried, the aesthetic encounter is defined by critically showing how the beholder's representation of the work trumps its material basis, its thingliness. As soon as either the material basis of the work itself or the beholder's presence is deliberately made explicit (that is, the work is no longer needed and becomes contingent purely on the beholder to exist), theatricality ensues and absorption is cut short.' (Jackson, 2014, p349)

So, for Fried and Jackson, when the theatricality of the artwork encounter is manifest, engagement with the artwork is lost. But when the viewer is absorbed by the artwork they 'forget themselves.' This is a misreading of Harman as we see below, as it is the very theatricality of the encounter that makes it absorbing, with the viewer performing a theatrical act of mimesis, (Harman, 2016, p249) and the spectator needing to be self-aware that they are viewing art (Harman, 2016, p249).<sup>13</sup>

Harman deals directly with Fried and according to Harman, Fried has misread the encounter between the spectator and the artwork. It is not about what the artwork can do for the viewer but what an artwork / viewer combination can do for the viewer. He acknowledges and disputes Fried's position in *Art and Objecthood*.

'Fried was right to call for an art without literalism, but wrong to see the human as solely a literalising agent. While the artwork must have a depth beyond how it is encountered by the spectator, the human is less a spectator than a co-constituent of the artwork itself, since nonfascinating art simply fails in a way that nonfascinating science does not.' (Harman, 2014, p101)

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<sup>13</sup> I have some sympathy for Jackson as Harman is continually redefining his position, extrapolating and - perhaps -disassembling as he goes. Extorting others to continue his work. ('Harman, 2011b). This is actually something that Jackson refers to in his own text, *If Materialism is Not the Solution Then What Was the Problem?*, 'Navigating any contemporary philosophical system is hard, as it is navigating a new computer language or cityscape. No-one really knows what it can do, at least not without experimentation. Systems of thought do not operate any differently.' (Jackson, 2014, p111)

## **The Postmodern Spectator**

So, by adopting a position contra Fried and allying himself with what the viewer finds in the art object it would seem Harman is endorsing the route of postmodernism, itself borne out of minimalism. Adopting the position of the viewer that Michael Fried bemoaned; a self-conscious spectator aware of and analysing their relationship to the artwork whilst looking at it.

But the ‘relational’ aspect of Postmodern art in which artist and spectator collaborate in an art situation of indeterminate length (Bishop, 2012, p3) is similarly rejected by Harman as it adds a layer that further distracts. As he says,

‘The supposedly isolated physical object that we encounter is not isolated at all, since, after all, we are encountering it. It already belongs in a relational context with me, the perceiver. In short, this supposedly isolated object is always already over-contextualised through its relation to me, and hence it is overkill to seek even more context by going outside that object to find an even broader framing mechanism that ultimately includes the gallery system, or capitalism, or some other even more massive context... The real frame is what lies in the thing, deeper than any possible direct access to it, so that the thing can only be approached obliquely.’ (Harman, 2015, p105)

Reassuringly, we can say he agrees with us that each artwork generates its own singular echo, and that contextualising it quiets, muffles or silences that echo. Harman is strident in his insistence on the role of the spectator, in his words the artwork ‘needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, not on the basis of the false principle that human beings and objects must be purified from each other in order for art to be art.’ (Harman, 2016, p216)

## **An Object Oriented Spectator**

To return to the Cox and Haskey interview, the most interesting part of Harman’s responses is not regards where the spectator is, or if artworks exist with or without a viewer, but his take on what actually happens when we look at artwork, founded on his idiosyncratic take on mimesis. He says;

‘Though mimesis usually is taken to mean producing a copy of a real world outside the mind, my philosophy suggests that this will never be possible. But what if instead of producing a copy, mimesis meant that we ourselves tried to *become* an object other than ourselves, as if intellectual life were simply a giant school of method acting’ (Harman, 2015, p110)

As this notion is so crucial to this thesis I want to quote him at length here, this is taken from a conference speech he gave at MACBA, Barcelona in March 2012;

“My philosophy is a realism in which reality by definition is completely incommensurable with the known. It is a weird realism in which objects



are uncanny and can only flicker from the depths of the night like ghosts, without ever becoming present in the daylight. I've claimed that reality can only ever be known obliquely, indirectly, elusively, but today's discussion suggests that when we do this we are not just hinting at something that lies outside us but actually imitating or mimicking or embodying a reality that never becomes present, by becoming a new thing and taking on its array of qualities. The usual distance from the world that we have in normal everyday language and perception is ended by our sincere involvement in some artwork or joke or unusually vivid mood and we become that thing. Instead of hopelessly burrowing toward unknown things beyond our grasp we produce translations of those things for which we ourselves provide the reality principle. I become the burning tree or I become the dance." (Harman, 2012c)

So, what is happening is that the viewer and artwork are combining in one object, as the viewer is trying to mimetically capture the qualities of what it is they are seeing. Elsewhere Harman has been clear that 'my interaction with express trains or roses forms an object, an immediate unity between me and the object perceived.' (Harman, 2005, p201-2) The combination of these two statements means that we can deduce that the 'mimicking-spectator forms a union with the artwork creating a third object.

The notion of a 'beholder' is fallacious as that separates the viewer from the artwork when they are actually one and the same thing, you can't have one without the other. This is where Fried (and ergo Jackson) were mistaken.

'This is the reason we can't accept Fried's simultaneous rejection of the literal and the theatrical. It amounts to excluding in the same stroke both human-as-beholder *and* human-as-ingredient from the proper sphere of aesthetics.' (Harman, 2016, p222)

Harman doesn't reject the term theatrical as his form of mimesis is a theatrical gesture on by the viewer. Harman understands the theatrical as being performative and the viewer must take up a performative role when encountering an artwork. They play a part within the artwork, as the artwork must include the encounter between viewer and object. (Harman, 2016, p224) This finding resonates, as an echo does. Furthermore, as an echo is something we can be inside, the aptness of this term is underlined. We can now think that the singular echo of the artwork is the object, the encounter and what is produced by it, in and by the spectator.

So, to reiterate the spectator forms a third object with the artwork. The spectator has not been eliminated but *immersed* in this new object. We could say that the modernistic perspective on spectatorship sides with the artwork, that then absorbs the viewer. The post-modernistic or relational perspective sides with the viewer, activating the artwork. The OOO perspective gives both equal footing, artwork and viewer are joined by the encounter in a new object, the third object.

This immersion is key to understanding the four encounters we isolated as key in the introduction to this thesis, and what O'Sullivan doesn't include in his discussion of them, that the encounter-er is immersed in whatever they are in encountering.

We can now think through this by returning to Harman's philosophy, firstly with his work on Ortega y Gasset and secondly with his concept Vicarious Causation

### **Jose Ortega y Gasset and Metaphor**

Harman acknowledges the role and influence of Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset in the inspiration and formation of his ontology, specifically an essay written as introduction to a collection of poetry in 1914. There isn't space in this thesis to include detail analysis of this essay, instead it is included in Appendix One, part iii.

The thrust of Ortega y Gasset's chooses the following metaphor,

The thrust of this essay is that the metaphor, (taken from a poem by Valencian poet Lopez Pico,): 'A cypress 'is like the ghost of a dead flame,' has forced us into the state of 'cypress', we have made it into an action, a verb, we cypress.

'In other words, I will have to find a way to force the word 'cypress,' with its nominal value, to become active and erupt, assuming that of a verb...  
...We simply sense an identity, we live executantly this being, the cypress-flame.' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p144-145)

Harman endorses fully Ortega y Gasset's account of metaphor and he would present this new object formed by the metaphor as part of his ontology. This is the third object of the artwork encounter. He has also rethought this encounter. Writing in his most recent book, Dante's Broken Hammer, an OOO analysis of Dante's Inferno, Harman returns to the Ortega y Gasset text on the Metaphor that has been so influential to his philosophy, going further this time to say:

'And this brings us to a point that I did not yet grasp at the time of Guerrilla Metaphysics. Namely, in the case of metaphor it is not a combination of the real cypress and the sensual flame-qualities, since the real cypress is necessarily absent from the scene...

Since the real cypress cannot be on hand to mate with the sensual flame-qualities, this falls to the only real object on the scene: I myself.'  
(Harman, 2016, p193)

That is to say it is not the poet or reader producing the metaphor but *actually becoming* it, underlining that this is what the third object, the object of the artwork encounter contains. The reader and the sensual qualities of the metaphorical object.

What is fundamental here in the development of his ontology, is how the initial flame and cypress of the metaphor have become separated from their qualities. It is important to remember that the original metaphorical tree and flame are objects in Harman's schema so analysis of how they might shift in appearance and form is valid, and therefore any patterns distinguished here between these objects are transferable to the relations between what we might consider 'more real' objects. The two originators of our flame-cypress feeling have been disassembled to create our new object. The bond that existed between the real thing and the way it manifests to us, its sensual qualities, has been fractured, this provides the structure of the relation 'allure' from Chapter One. Harman believes the structure of allure, (itself taken from what Harman calls aesthetic experience,) gives us a clue into the metaphysical reality of the world. Which, to reiterate, is normally in a state of 'sincerity'.<sup>14</sup>

Although metaphor is an exemplar of allure, allure doesn't only operate in metaphor, humour, beauty, charm, cuteness are all forms of allure according to Harman, in which we become more aware of the qualities of something rather than the object itself. This awareness of that thing, our (sometimes literal) attachment to it, creates a new object, a third object, on the interior of which is our intention and that which attracted us. Our intentionality has become its own object, containing parts of us, the Real Object, and whatever it is we are beholding. This new object must be approached like all other objects in Harman's ontology and described obliquely.

This is why Harman says an artwork needs an attentive viewer as without this there is no intentionality and no spectating. And Harman has used this 'aesthetic' experience, to explain how all these withdrawn objects interact within his philosophy. Harman believes that 'real-world' causation follows an aesthetic template which he sees as paradigmatic of change at large, therefore he claims philosophy is first aesthetics as it operates as aesthetics does. (Harman, 2012) We will examine this in more detail below.

### **Vicarious Causation**

As we saw in the conclusion to Chapter One in developing his metaphysics Harman encountered a problem: How can one Real Object affect another. Working through Harman's take on spectatorship and the metaphor we have discovered the template he developed to account for change, it has to be addressed obliquely as he says: 'We cannot know the world directly, whether through undermining, overmining, or duoming, but must approach it obliquely in the manner of Socrates or Picasso.' (Harman, 2013b, p48)

He uses the aesthetic encounter or the metaphor of Ortega y Gasset as analogous processes and he coins the term Vicarious Causation as his term for this oblique approach. We can now hypothesise how this might operate in a non-aesthetic meeting.

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<sup>14</sup> For more details on Sincerity see Appendix One

One Real Object can only encounter another Real Object via its Sensual profile, that is to say 'vicariously.' So, if we imagine Harman in a forest wandering amongst the trees, they would all be Sensual versions of the Real trees that were withdrawn. But, were Harman to make contact with the tree and snap a branch off of it he would be touching the Sensual Object but the branch would also be lost from the real object. Somehow, the Sensual Object tree is the means by which the Real Harman is able to touch the Real Tree. The Sensual Object of the tree becomes the meeting between two Real Objects; the third object within which they meet, the object of the encounter. As he has it,

'To say that formal cause operates vicariously means that forms do not touch one another directly, but somehow melt, fuse, and decompress in a shared common space from which all are partly absent. My claim is that two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact.' (Harman, 2007b, p190)

This reiterates what we have just learnt when analysing Harman on spectatorship, furthermore the space where this takes place is also an object: The key to vicarious causation is that relations themselves are also objects, composed of the same four profiles as anything else. So, when a real object encounters the sensual profile of another, this is within another object: *the third object*, 'Two vicariously linked real objects do form a new object, since they generate a new internal space.' (Harman, 2007b, p207)

Sparrow introduces the notion of translation as a way of understanding this,

'Harman's solution is to say that objects only ever make aesthetic contact. Their interactions are always a product of translation or metaphor. Morton concurs: translation is a superior way to think what causality is all about.' (Sparrow, 2014, p167)

As we took our notion of the 'singular echo' from the literature of translation, I think we can double down on this notion of it being a process analogous to translation. So, when we read a text in another language, say Spanish, as we translate it in our heads into English we become the phrase that we are creating, it contains elements of us and our understanding of the two languages and obviously, (assuming we've translated it correctly,) the meaning of the original text as well. Furthermore, people often say they are someone else when speaking in other languages and this bears thinking about when considering the new object that is created during the process.

And we have the third object that needs analysing, that contains parts of both objects, in our case the artwork and the viewer.

'This new object is the result of a vicarious relation whose existence remains unexplained, but whose reality is undeniable. The new object has both phenomenal and metaphysical aspects, neither of which can be ignored by philosophy.' (Sparrow, 2014, p132)

Harman is clear about this:

‘At the heart of every intention is a relation between a real object (me) and a sensual one (whatever I intend). Two real objects cannot make contact directly, given their total withdrawal from each other. Likewise, two sensual objects can make contact only through the medium of the beholder, since both have no existence except as correlates of my own involvement with them... the only kinds of objects able to make direct contact are those of opposite polarity, the real and the sensual. It follows that the links that hold the world together make up a chain of alternating real and sensual objects. Yet at the same time, the intentional act is also one, since I form a composite union with what I intend, just as two magnets snap into one, or multiple chemical elements form a molecule.’ (Harman, 2016, p247)

This intentional act is the third object, a composite of, in the case of this thesis, spectator and artwork.

Elizabeth Povinelli summarises Harman neatly in an essay, *The World is Flat and Other Super Weird Ideas*,

‘Although we cannot know objects and thus reality, and trying to know them reproduces the correlational fallacy, we can know that they are objects because... we can encounter the truth of the theory through aesthetic experience... Because the human-world relation does not fundamentally differ from other object relations, all object relations are aesthetic relations. Thus not only are all existents (objects) made to be the same kind of things, but all relations between objects are also the same.’ (Povinelli, 2016, p109)

To give one final example, in his book *Dante’s Broken Hammer*, Harman analyses Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* in combination with phenomenologist Max Scheler, Harman uses the concept of love as another metaphor for the third object which can help us visualise it. (Harman, 2016, p168 – 173).

If we think of our love for someone, then this love is an object in its own right, containing us and qualities of the beloved. The reverse would also be true, the Love that someone has for us contains them and qualities of us.

‘the lover and the beloved (in ethics as in art) as a single unit irreducible to either term, or to a mere side-by-side existence of both.’ (Harman, 2016, p215)

To return to the terms of Harman’s ontology, the lover is the real object, the beloved the sensual object, both of which are joined with the third object, which is the love of the real object for the beloved.

## **Conclusion**

We have learnt that despite what we might expect, without a viewer there is no artwork. But conversely, without an artwork there is no viewer. The OOO concept of spectatorship relies on an attentive spectator and an artwork that will

engage them. Once these two components are in place then both spectator and artwork are joined together inside a third object. The spectator is the Real Object, entangled by the Sensual Qualities that have appealed to them.

The lover is bewitched by their beloved, inside the third object that is their attachment thinking about what so attracted them. The viewer is staring at the painting trying to become its diagonal composition in the third object that is the artwork encounter.

So, we now know that for Harman the act of viewing an artwork results in a viewer imitating the artwork inside an object that is this event we have called the third object after Harman. I believe this third object is the key to understanding spectating, and the singular echo that art writing misses. It is clear that to describe it we must describe the spectator as well as the artwork, which means some of ourselves, as that is within the third object. We explore this in more depth in the next chapter; like all objects in Harman's ontology, the key to describing the third object will be to approach it obliquely.

# Chapter Four

## The Third Object & The Singular Echo

### Abstract

Having reached the conclusion in the previous chapter that the viewer and artwork are fused together into a third object, the conclusion must be that it is through a description of this that we will be closest to describing the singular echo. In this chapter I will provide a means of describing it. We will see that by following Harman this means responding obliquely, and this means aesthetically. Ekphrasis is the practice of responding with aesthetic writing to artwork, most often this means poetry and I work through Stephen Cheeke on this subject. I find traditional ekphrasis lacking as it tends to concentrate on what it is looking at, so to speak, and not on the artwork encounter that we have decided we must focus on. In terms of describing this encounter / third object I extrapolate potential methods based on the following sub-categories: metaphor, personal narrative, abstraction, intimacy before an extended section incorporating comparisons between science-fiction and abstraction. I end by tentatively outlining an ethics inherent in a third object worldview.

### Introduction

As we have seen through the last chapter in Harman's take on spectatorship we are inside a third object when encountering an artwork. In doing so we have filled the gap in his ontology<sup>15</sup> and explained in more detail how he accounts for change. In terms of the artwork we have the viewer meeting the artwork inside the third object, trying to become their own representation of it, a personal experience. As Harman says,

‘I have argued, against Fried, that this requires the beholder to replace the vanished object of aesthetics with its own theatrical assumption of the object's role, as if wearing a mask that need not be seen by others, but only by oneself.’ (Harman, 2016, p249)

So, the beholder is activating the artwork in their own head, underlining that the viewing of an artwork is an event in itself; the creation of the third object. This fits our own terminology of the singular echo as like the third object, the echo is something that the viewer is inside. Therefore, we are left with the artwork encounter being as much about the third object created as it is about the artwork. This is how we capture the singular echo and, in my view, it is

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<sup>15</sup> The other gap or question most often asked of this factor of his ontology is regards infinite regression, that is if contact with an object leads to another object then the contact between that newly created object and another object would again lead to another object. Harman's response is to say that if you don't have this you either have finite regression; there is point at which we have said we've reached the 'truth' or no regression at all, and in everything is present always, in a state of immanence. (Harman, 2012) Harman would reject Deleuze's Plane of Immanence for overmining the objects within it.

fascinating. It is a weird combination of the particularity of artwork and duality of the encounter.

Now we should return to the questions that inaugurated this study, the encounters that I wanted to analyse,

1. The encountering of something (stimuli) I think should be painted
2. The act of making a painting of that stimuli
3. The encounter with an artwork (spectating)
4. Writing a text about an artwork

Numbered here we can think of Encounter 2 being reliant on Encounter 1 and likewise Encounter 4 relying on Encounter 3.

What is interesting if we think through these encounters following Harman's philosophy then it is within a third object that these encounters take place. This leads me to ask what if encounter 2 was about making a painting of the third object in which encounter 1 took place? And equally what if encounter 4 was about writing a text about the object in which encounter 3 took place?

### **Harman and the Third Object**

To return to the brief description of my practice I gave in the introduction, it would be relevant to address this is Harmanesque language. When I encounter something that I want to paint, and as I said this could be hearing a phrase or seeing a pile of card on a table or noticing the composition in a painting by someone else, I and this object are enclosed in a third object. If we were to imagine myself looking at the table; I, as Real Object, am encountering the card, (the Sensual Object.) Because of the way this card is lain across the table, a painting is suggested to me. This relation between Real Object, (me,) and Sensual Object, (card,) would normally be classed as a *sincere*<sup>16</sup> one and if reflected on by me, this reflection becomes an object in its own right. But were I to try and explain that encounter in words, it would be impossible to paraphrase as the Real Object that is this encounter withdraws from access. Nevertheless, I and the Sensual Qualities of the card that attracted me are enclosed in a third object, the relationship between us charged by the process Harman designates as *allure*.

And when I start to paint the pile of card I am not trying to paint it photo-realistically or perhaps not even interested in making it apparent that it is card. I am not trying to paint the card so much as trying to paint the desire to try and paint the card, to capture the moment of fascination with it, when I saw it as something more than a pile of card. So, the notion that I am actually trying to paint the object I was in when I encountered the card, or whatever stimuli I am studying makes sense to me.

Abstraction, both visually, (in terms of what I am representing) and conceptually, (in terms of painting about a sensation) is an important factor in the process of my painting practice. Though I may start with an encounter with

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<sup>16</sup> For more details on Sincere relations see Appendix One



the kind of recognisable object, I want to take it somewhere unrecognisable, though still recognisably 'real'. Simultaneously of this world but otherworldly. Abstraction is an important strategy for me, but as we have seen with Amy Sillman quote, abstraction doesn't mean foregoing representation. In her words,

'I also think that you have to believe that when you're making private, poetic work, you are not doing something different from the world, you're in fact finally, if you get it right, making something that is realistic to the world, even if it's abstract. Because that represents the world accurately. And that world can be an inner world. For instance, in my it is a realistic representation of thinking.' (Sillman, 2007, p27)<sup>17</sup>

### **The Singular Echo**

If we were to think about the task of writing about painting in the same way as painting, we see that it must be the object that is the encounter that must be our focus. The singular echo of the artwork turns out to be the encounter with the artwork. As noted this makes sense as an echo is something you can be inside, it surrounds you, it is an event like the artwork encounter. So, it is not the artwork itself that should be written about in this case, following the example set by my painting practice, containing both object and viewer. The viewer becomes the painting, or at least in their heads, providing the 'reality principle.'

As I have shown, this third object is a composite of both myself as spectator providing the 'reality principle', activating the work, and the sensual qualities that drew them to the artwork and consequently formed this painting-spectator hybrid, that is the third object.

'In the case of aesthetics, the shift to the real happens when the sensual object and its qualities are split, and the beholder becomes the theatrical support for those qualities, as in metaphor; when this split fails to occur, the result is non-art.' (Harman, 2016, p248)

In the case of spectatorship, we know that it involves the viewer (as real object) looking at the artwork. They are joined by the sensual qualities of the art object that have bewitched the viewer, attached to the viewer as the cypress-flame metaphor did, as the viewer somehow imitates the art object.<sup>18</sup>

We will also avoid undermining, overmining and duoming as we aren't trying to describe the painting directly, as we will fail for the reasons seen in Chapter Two, instead we are describing the encounter, the sensual echo, which as an attentive spectator we are a fundamental ingredient.

We can find support from Susan Sontag in reaching these conclusions. We can return to part of a citation in Chapter Two that emphasises the experiential

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<sup>17</sup> We don't need to limit our approach to abstract work, but it might seem the more obvious place for it. Abstraction has another significance for this study as we shall see later in the chapter.

<sup>18</sup> In the next chapter I give the tarnished silver leaf of the painting *The Battle of San Romano* as example of qualities that have attached to me.

nature of the artwork encounter: 'A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience.' (Sontag, 1965 p21)

She continues in a manner that Harman would mirror forty years later. She claims that works of art:

'Present information and evaluations. But their distinctive feature is that they give rise not to conceptual knowledge (which is the distinctive feature of discursive or scientific knowledge- e.g., philosophy, sociology, psychology, history) but to something like an excitation, a phenomenon of commitment, judgement in a state of thralldom or captivation. Which is to say that the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgement) in itself.' (Sontag, 1965, p21 – 22)

Here, as Harman does, she is saying that the knowledge created by art is unique, but also her phrase 'an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something' we can read as explaining that the artwork encounter is like Harman's take on mimesis about the encountering of something as something but that it is an active, participatory experience: what I am painting about is the experience of wanting to paint not what is being represented. But this also means we can think of Encounter 1 in my list as being a quasi-artwork encounter, even if it is not an artwork acting as stimuli. If non-art objects also omit the singular echo this has political implications that form the embryo of the ethics I will outline at the end of this chapter.

Sontag continues in a manner that seems to pre-empt Harman's insistence on an attentive spectator.

'...Hence, too, the peculiar dependence of a work of art, however expressive, upon the cooperation of the person having the experience, for one may see what is 'said' but remain unmoved, either through dullness or distraction. Art is seduction, not rape. A work of art proposes a type of experience designed to manifest the quality of imperiousness. But art cannot seduce without the complicity of the experiencing subject.'  
(Sontag, 1965, p22)

I think that we can see in Sontag that Harman has identified an area of interest within the study of spectatorship, that of the encounter of the third object. I believe that this is key for thinking about how we should write about painting. But now we have theoretically posited that the third object exists and have decided that it is here we want to direct our attention, we reach a conclusion. If we keep strictly to Harman, and his tenet that objects can only be approached obliquely, then the closest we can get to the executant reality inside of the third object is by responding to it aesthetically. (Using Harman's definition of aesthetic, this means with an artwork.)

And in advocating the aesthetic as the best response to the aesthetic we find ourselves endorsing a form with a long history; Ekphrasis.

## Ekphrasis

In *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* Stephen Cheeke provides a useful overview of Ekphrasis that we will examine in a little depth. It starts following Foucault's notion of irreducibility and the quote I used in the introduction, it sets out the gap between the literary and visual.

'Critical writing everywhere also sounds the warning: how can poetry hope to represent, describe or reproduce painting? How can literary language find a parallel or an analogy with art? How could we conceive of a poet being successful in his or her attempt to write about visual representation?' (Cheeke, 2008, p1)

And Cheeke is an advocate for the critical capabilities of an aesthetic response. He and Harman would be in accordance on that; 'The best poems for paintings are themselves works of art, offering a commentary upon or an interpretation of an artwork that is simultaneously open to interpretation or appreciation as an artwork in its own right.' (Cheeke, 2008, p3)

But the examples of ekphrasis he gives aren't for the artwork encounter, they are for the artwork itself. We do not just want 'the verbal representation of visual representation' (Cheeke, 2008, p4) but the verbal representation of visual experience. That is, we want a verbal representation of the experience, the event, the encounter of viewing the painting, not just a description of whatever the painting is depicting.

Cheeke's analysis is founded on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's distinction in *Laocoon*, in painting being a spatial form and poetry a temporal one: 'Poetry opens up the static image to the temporal schema of language to the 'sequential elements of syntax.' ' (Cheeke, 2008, p5) Keats 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' leads Cheeke to elucidate three paradoxes that operate in the poem/painting binary. Silence/speech, stillness/movement, time/eternity. (Cheeke, 2008, p46) He calls the moment of the painting the 'for ever now' the frozen moment: 'The single moment or 'now', which presents no conceptual difficulty in a painting, is actually impossible to grasp in normal time.' (Cheeke, 2008, p 61) And a lot of ekphrastic poetry seeks to add 'time' to paintings: 'Poems about paintings often seek to revive or reanimate the sequence' (Cheeke, 2008, p61)

In a later chapter on prose ekphrasis we find reference to *The Museum Age* by Germain Bazin that 'the act of looking becomes a sort of trance uniting spectator and masterpiece.' (Bazin, 1967, p265) Which sounds like a Harmanesque take on Spectatorship and then this leads Cheeke to conclude;

'Then the representation of that trance in art criticism requires a secondary form of verbal mystification for the reader to be able to participate in the original experience.

The powerful prose description that seeks to reproduce this kind of experience in a reader might be represented as working then as a form of incantation or evocatory magic that replaces or stands in for the subjective experience of the gallery visitor, instructing that visitor in the

correct aesthetic response while mystifying the art object itself.’ (Cheeke, 2008, p171)

Which is a conclusion that would mirror the third object encounter,

‘A prose description of especial potency like this is capable then of reorganizing the visual image so that we can no longer see what was there before it was written. The process recalls the ‘incessant conjunctioning between things as they are and things imagined’, which Stevens had argued was a common truth about all acts of perception.’ (Cheeke, 2008, p177)

And this conjunctioning between things as they are would be the Real Object and things imagined, the Sensual Qualities. This leads to Cheeke finding a creative capability within mimesis as Harman did; ‘Ekphrasis then is an example both of the creative act itself – through the Greek mimesis, imitating, copying – and of the secondary critical act of commentary, description, revelation.’ (Cheeke, 2008, p185) We find this synthesis only through stretching Cheeke’s meaning to its limits, if we push his account of ekphrasis to say more about how the encounter might be written about.

In an earlier chapter exploring the relationship of photography to ekphrasis he refers to Don DeLillo’s novel *Mao II*, in a chapter. But what he doesn’t draw attention to in DeLillo’s novel is when Scott, (a character in the novel and acolyte of writer Bill Gray [the protagonist of the novel,]) says the following;

‘When I read Bill I think of photographs of tract houses at the edge of the desert. There’s an incidental menace. That great Winogrand photo of a small child at the head of a driveway and the fallen tricycle and the storm shadow on the bare hills.’ (DeLillo, 1991, p51)

Which is what excited me when I read the novel, this reference to the world conjured by the artwork but not deliberately spelt out. So, what is happening to Scott when he reads these novels is he is entering the world of Winogrand photography that though isn’t the subject of the novels it is how they feel, what they are evocative of. This is the third object of that novel for Scott. This line excited me as it seemed to mirror the way I believe successful artworks are encountered and experienced; they pick us up and place us in a new world. And it is this new world that I have found in Harman as the third object, and that I believe we should write about.

Perhaps we can refer to the type of ekphrasis we are looking for as associative ekphrasis as it is what happens when the viewer associates with the artwork, both in the sense that it mingles with it within the third object but also because the third object also contains associations the attentive viewer brings with them.

I think this is more akin to the ekphrasis of the artwork encounter, of the singular echo: An ekphrasis of the third object than the traditional topic explored in Cheeke’s book which is about a verbal description of whatever is depicted in the artwork, not least this denies Ekphrasis the potential of abstraction as it only describes the appearances depicted within the artwork.

## **Speculative proposals for a method: Metaphor**

Perhaps we can look at some successful writing about painting for guidance. A very impressive writer on painting is the painter David Salle. The following is about painter Amy Sillman;

‘Amy’s paintings, though populated with figures and figurative gestures, use the canvas as a workshop in which eccentrically shaped blocks of color are cobbled together in a kind of improvisational architecture, like memories of houses that you never actually lived in.’ (Salle, 2010, p173)

The metaphorical final phrase of this quote is where it is most impressive. Salle risks that he might be misunderstood but the clarity of the simile means he is not. In Harmanesque language: The architectural structure within the Sillman painting has enmeshed Salle and he is imitating it in his mind, conjuring images of spaces he might have occupied. This is the singular echo of the painting, the third object he is inside. This use of metaphorical language is a useful pointer of how we might write about the third object and as we are endorsing creative writing as art criticism, as a methodology for capturing the singular echo of the artwork.

## **Speculative proposals for a method: Personal Narrative**

As a further example of employing metaphor or allegory, the following piece was written by the organiser of a Philip Guston exhibition, it utilises a personal story to give further depth to the encounter with his work:

‘When I was a teenager, we lived on Reunion Island, off the coast of Madagascar, where my parents were missionaries. Walking in downtown St. Denis one afternoon, I heard sirens and saw smoke. The mosque was burning. The firefighters were in charge and there was nothing anyone else could do. Looking up, I saw men standing on balconies, facing the fire solemnly and quietly, holding open their copies of the Koran. This powerful and calm act struck me deeply. By holding open the holy book, these men were acting. Holding up the Koran could not stop the fire, but it inscribed this moment, putting it within a larger context. In some way it neutralized the destruction.

The space between Guston’s late paintings and the viewer feels the same way. It is the courage that Guston demonstrates in and through these late transitional works that empowers them and moves the viewer to consider living more deeply. I have been no exception. The mundane is made holy. The flawed human is connected to the good. And the craziness that invades our lives is isolated and tamed because these paintings are true.’ (Weber, 2000, p3)

This use of a personal narrative like Salle’s use of metaphor is instructive. We can assert that this is what an oblique response to an artwork looks like, it is through the adoption of a storytelling or narrative form that the third object can be described. This is the aesthetic response we need, and the one I adopted for

my practical research. In the resultant texts I look to reflect the arrangement of intensities and moods I found within the artworks; its Sensual Qualities to use Harman's terms, so that they might be read away from the artworks and allow the reader to re-enter the world of the encounter with the third object, to experience the singular echo of the artwork.

### **Speculative proposals for a method: Abstraction**

If we think back to the list of things that John Hoyland gave as inspiring his work then anyone who knows his work will know that he isn't a representational painter, he isn't depicting these things, so he must be painting the experience of them. Hoyland also said about his work,

'Paintings are there to be experienced, they are events. They are also to be meditated on and to be enjoyed by the senses; to be felt through the eye.

The way that they are perceived, as with nature, will be conditioned by the individual onlooker's feelings, background and temperament. Paintings are not intellectual, they don't describe events, don't tell a story, they are not concerned with history, literature, science, theatre, mathematics, or movement; they are still.

One discovers a painting as one might discover a forest with snow falling, and then suddenly, unexpectedly, come upon an open glade with sunlight penetrating the falling snow, simultaneously.

Paintings are not to be reasoned with, they are not to be understood, they are to be recognized. They are an equivalent to nature, not an illustration of it; their test is in the depth of the artist's imagination.' (Hoyland, 1979)

Within this framework I would argue that the only honest way that one can respond to this work is aesthetically. We are not adding narrative content to the painting but to the encounter. If Sillman is representing thinking in her painting (Sillman, 2007, p11) then we want texts that can represent as abstractly as she paints.

### **Speculative proposals for a method: Intimacy**

I might further argue that one of the reasons that fiction is the most appropriate method of writing about painting is that I think the relationship between viewer and painting is an intimate one, as is the one between the reader and the novel.

As Rebecca Solnit wrote in her essay *Flight*,

'Like many others who turned into writers, I disappeared into books when I was very young, disappeared into them like someone running into the woods... ...Before writers are writers they are readers, living in books, through books, in the lives of others that are also the heads of others, in that act that is so intimate and yet so alone.' (Solnit, 2013, p60)

This is the singular echo of the book that the reader is living within. Therefore, perhaps fiction, more precisely the reading of it, is the best way of mirroring the singular echo of the painting. Within the same essay Solnit says the following, which neatly overlaps with Harman's notion of the third object and spectatorship;

'The object we call a book is not the real book, but its potential, like a musical score or seed. It exists fully only in the act of being read; and its real home is inside the head of the reader, where the symphony resounds, the seed germinates.' (Solnit, 2013, p63)

The reader is in fact constantly performing ekphrasis by picturing the world they are reading, providing the reality principle to the world of the novel. They are the Real Object, in Harman's words the reader is replacing the vanished object of aesthetics, as the Real Object has withdrawn. (Harman, 2016, p249)

### **Science Fiction & Abstraction**

Within fiction, both speculative-fiction and science-fiction are particularly helpful and provide a cogent way to think through the third object. As our understanding of the third object was that it was akin to world creation, and as perhaps the most pronounced form of literary world creation Science Fiction should be a reference point; not only is a world evoked by the author, including, perhaps, different natural laws and technologies.<sup>19</sup>

We can also see an instructive parallel between an abstract painting practice and a speculative fiction writing practice. If we return to Ortega y Gasset's essay once again he addresses the subject of metaphor and as we have seen he articulates that he sees a metaphor as a microcosm of an artwork:

'I say the esthetic object and the metaphorical object are the same, or rather that metaphor is the elementary esthetic object, the beautiful cell.' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p140)

He means that the metaphor, in causing us to think different, to think as cypress as we saw in the last chapter, performs as an artwork but on a micro-level. And we can compare this with the following by canonical writer of science fiction Ursula K. Le Guin:

'The artist deals with what cannot be said in words.

The artist whose medium is fiction does this in words. The novelist says in words what cannot be said in words.

Words can be used thus paradoxically because they have, along with a semiotic usage, a symbolic or metaphorical usage...

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<sup>19</sup> There are doubtless links between Speculative Realism and Science Fiction to be further explored and within the last year *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* by Brian Willems was published, (though not in time to be read by this author.)

...

All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life - science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in function, is a metaphor.' (Le Guin, 1969, xvi-xvii)

We can see why. Artwork functions like a metaphor, so does the future in fiction, as indeed does fiction itself. Speculative Fiction like abstraction is expressing what we cannot articulate with 'realism' about what existence feels like, this is what writer Kim Stanley Robinson meant, when he said "the realism of our time is science-fiction" (Robinson, 2017) at a talk I saw in Barcelona. That science-fiction is closer to our everyday reality than the realism of literary fiction, and we can say the same about abstraction over the realism of a photo-realistic painting. Abstract painter Alan Gouk says in an essay entitled *The Language of Painting*:

'Whatever it might be, there seems to be 'something' to abstraction, some innate knowledge of something yet to be understood. If there wasn't then we (us abstract artists) wouldn't be so captivated by the experience of making and looking.' (Gouk, 2013)

That which is yet to be understood by the painter, is functioning as the future in fiction does and feels more real to us. By the same equation, writing about the third object encounter of the artwork, metaphorically describing its singular echo, brings us closer to the artwork than writing about the artwork itself.

Therefore, many of the third object texts written for the accompanying practical research, are what would be classed as speculative or science fiction; they are describing new worlds, different to our own, much as I think of my abstract paintings as doing. This follows my painting practice as I believe that the creation of the third object is a new 'thing' that needs to be encoded / decoded in the same way as science fiction and abstraction. To return to Simon O Sullivan, when he writes about Gerhard Richter's abstracts, we find our conclusion mirrored almost exactly:

'Almost as if such art is a fragment of a future world projected backwards in order to call that world into being.' (O'Sullivan, 2006 p145)

Harman has provided a credible philosophical justification, a framework for thinking through the problem of writing about art. As hopefully indicated above, this framework can provide bountiful results. Of course, it can never be empirically verified as scientifically correct. Harman's response to criticism of founding his philosophy on aesthetics, which he describes as generating 'angry sarcasm from certain neo-rationalist philosophers' (Harman, 2016, p178) is that though we can explain what something is or does, or both, and that this is how we attain knowledge, it doesn't follow that such knowledge 'exhausts the reality of the world.' (Harman, 2016, p178) Instead to use his terms we undermine,



overmine or duomine our subject. An artwork does none of these as it approaches its subject obliquely.

In the aforementioned essay by Elizabeth Povinelli she writes well about the appeal of OOO but is clear to also state that it requires a certain openness on the part of the viewer / reader / interlocutor to accept some of its tenets. She is talking about the three films by the Karrabing Film Collective, (of which she is part,) that although they contain a message or meaning and therefore could be read textually, they have an aesthetic content that allows them to allude to other truths. The quotation below emphasises that a certain level of faith is required from an adopter of this philosophy.

‘But as these texts circulate through the world, they also produce an aesthetic experience (or let’s just say they do). They produce a sense experience of a purposiveness without purpose (or let’s just say there is)- an object that is simultaneously alluring to universal truth and alluding to any capture of its essence in thought (as categorical or relational truth). This may be due to how, in the various stories, the central object is obscured rather than revealed by its encounter with other objects (including discourses). The narratives do not attempt to subsume their objects in a categorical concept or even a singular relational logic, but instead allude to an entire assemblage of attributes and qualities that are expressed and withdrawn, actual and emergent, when the object comes into contact with other objects.’ (Povinelli, 2016 p111)

## **Ethics**

I want to conclude by situating my practice within an even wider context, looking for an ethical position within the intimacy of it. As previously noted with reference to Rebecca Solnit, one of the reasons that fiction is an appropriate method for writing about painting is that the relationship between viewer and painting is an intimate one. Fiction puts the spectator in the same frame of mind as when viewing a painting. In reading W.J.T. Mitchell, who has written about the power and agency of images in other contexts. I have found endorsement for this point in his essay the *Intimacy of Abstraction*.

‘In this role, abstraction (especially when displayed outside the context of the blockbuster show) continues to be an absolute necessary antidote or counterspell to the aesthetics of distraction, the visual noise offered by mass media and everyday life.’ (Mitchell, 2006, p235)

I also think that this hints towards the sympathy I believe exists between science fiction and abstraction, it is an otherness, the unreal, that offers disruption, whilst still being about reality.

‘The sort of contemplative, concentrated seeing demanded by abstraction needn’t be associated with a regression to empathy, sentimentality, and (heaven forbid) private, bourgeois subjectivity. The democratizing of abstraction, its availability as a vernacular artistic tradition, offers access

to a space of intimacy in which new collective and public subjectivities might be nurtured.’ (Mitchell, 2006, p236)

This direction towards democratising spaces of personal abstraction is important and useful to consider here. And to think this further, I actually believe that the time taken over these small encounters can be adopted as an ethical approach in that they, in keeping with flat ontologies, encourage a conscientious approach to life. This kind of ethics is something that Jane Bennett has attempted to articulate within New Materialism. As Tom Sparrow write about Bennett:

‘this kind of approach would involve a theoretical or critical modesty that parallels the ethical demand for modesty implicit in the object-oriented perspective, as she views it. After all, it seems that in addition to correlationism and the linguistic turn, public enemy number one for SR and OOO, as well as new materialism, is human hubris.’ (Sparrow, 2014, p177)

And though Harman is critical of New Materialism *Materialism is Not the Solution* (Harman 2014c), I believe we can follow Jane Bennett in this;

‘Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trash.’ (Bennet, 2015, p235)<sup>20</sup>

Bennett, who has both contributed to and commented on, the ‘non-human’ turn in philosophy, advocates a ‘Vital Materialist’ approach. There are profound philosophical differences between her position and Harman’s; she situates these vital bodies within relational networks, that Harman wouldn’t recognise; he would see these networks as autonomous objects in their own right; and would emphasise that objects are more than their impact on others. (Harman 2014c) However, there are similarities in their respective philosophies. Bennett begins her book *Vibrant Matter* with a series of things that convinced her to pursue the topic and with a description of encountering some trash in Baltimore. Affected by it in the manner of a third object encounter;

‘But they were all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. In my encounter with the gutter on Cold Spring Lane, I glimpsed a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects. I achieved, for a moment,

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<sup>20</sup> As another literary comparison, Bennett’s text puts me in mind of Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*: ‘Think what it would be to have a work conceived from outside the self, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic.’ (Calvino, 1988, p124)

what Thoreau had made his life's goal: to be able, as Thomas Dumm puts it, 'to be surprised by what we see.'" (Bennett, 2009, p5)

And she mirrors Harman in suggesting that there is a new combined object / perceiver created in this interaction: 'But what if the swarming activity inside my head was itself an instance of the vital materiality that also constituted trash?' (Bennett, 2009, p10)

Keen to refute claims that New Materialism could be endorsing objectification in a traditional sense, that is, that people or animals are nothing more than objects or goods, available to be instrumentalised as such, Bennett acknowledges that 'there are of course differences between the knife that impales and the man impaled, between the technician who dabs the sampler and the sampler, between the array of items in the gutter of Cold Spring Lane and me, the narrator of their vitality.' (Bennett, 2009, p9) But she advocates that we view these relationships as flat rather than hierarchical.<sup>21</sup>

'To note this fact explicitly, which is also to begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility.' (Bennett, 2009, p10)

I concur that this is an important step to thinking more ecologically because, as Bennett says, 'we are daily confronted with evidence of nonhuman vitalities actively at work around and within us.' (Bennett, 2015, p234)

And I think we can push Harman's account so that we don't privilege these experiences to art / certain objects. We think about the third object encounter that leads to a painting as being the same as the third object encounter with a non-art object. This is contra Harman who says;

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<sup>21</sup> There isn't sufficient space in this thesis but if we wanted to look for further comparisons between painting and an Object-Oriented or New Materialism position we might look at some of the scholarship of still life painting. Itself originally the lowest in the hierarchy of genres, (Bryson, 1990) still-life adopts a non-hierarchical relationship between things. Norman Bryson writes very well about the genre of Still Life in *Looking at the Overlooked* (1990) and uses the term Rhopography borrowed from Charles Sterling; 'Rhopography (from rhopos, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks.' (Bryson, 1990, p61)

I think we can describe Object philosophy or New Materialism as a rhopographical venture, like still life it forces us to attend to that which might be ignored

'Still life takes on the exploration of what 'importance' tramples underfoot. It attends to the world ignored by the human impulse to create greatness. Its assault on the prestige of the human subject is therefore conducted at a very deep level.' (Bryson, 1990, p61)

‘If all relations were equally significant, then every entity would become a new thing in every trivial instant of its existence, since our relations with objects are ever on the move.’ (Harman, 2016b, p44)<sup>22</sup>

So, I’m pushing beyond Harman here, but, I think legitimately. Why shouldn’t every entity be a new thing in every trivial instant? Tristan Garcia takes this perspective. We can understand ‘third object thinking’ as a state of mind that allows us to experience the work or world as such and we can push ourselves to apply this state of mind to our whole existence; a template for more conscientious ecological approach.<sup>23</sup>

If we return to Sontag’s *On Style* we find further endorsement of the art encounter as an educational exercise; ‘The overcoming or transcending of the world in art is also a way of encountering the world, and of training or educating the will to be in the world.’ (Sontag, 1965, p30-31) As a form of moral training, as it instructs us in how to take a conscious approach to life rather than unthinkingly existing or following orders (Sontag, 1965, p25);

‘Art performs this ‘moral’ task because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life.’ (Sontag, 1965, p25)

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<sup>22</sup> French philosopher Tristan Garcia would probably hold the above to be true, (Garcia, 2010.) A pair of articles discussing the philosophy of the other and their different approaches to ‘time’ are readable in *Parrhesia Number 16*. (Garcia, 2013) (Harman, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> The idea that there is a political element to the thinking ‘aesthetically’ isn’t a new one. Stephen Cheeke found something similar in *Ode to a Grecian Urn*,

‘There is (the poet might claim) something self-enclosed and unparaphrasable about the beauty of the Grecian urn, something surplus to description, irreducible. The feeling this produces is one that belongs to a unique category of emotion (an aesthetic one). But this does not mean that it is a state of feeling or affect unburdened by thought. On the contrary, it involves the steadfast contemplation and cognitive apprehension of difficult paradoxes and truths.’ (Cheeke, 2008, p48)

Cheeke also finds it in the Wallace Stevens poem *Blue Guitar*, ‘In other words, Stevens the artist does not want to claim poetry as a refuge or escape from ‘reality’, but rather as existing in a vital and alchemical relation to the world-as-it-is, with an agency and capacity to transform things as they are.’ (Cheeke, 2008, p127)

And we find a similar perspective in O’Sullivan: ‘This is a programme for an expanded notion of art practice and for living our lives as an art practice.’ (O’Sullivan, 2006, p34)

Though this isn’t surprising as Jane Bennet acknowledges her debt to Deleuze (Bennet, 2009). O’Sullivan sees the ethics in the aesthetics, calling it Ethicoaesthetics, the ethical dimension of taking an aesthetic approach to life,

‘This is not a programme of escapism, even less the outline of a utopian metaphysics. Rather it is a call for attention to be focused on the actual, if only to unlock the potential becomings, the virtualities encapsulated within every moment. It is here that the ‘in-between’ nature of art practice again becomes important. Art is always situated between the actual and the virtual.’ (O’Sullivan, 2006, p34)

There was again, within recent scholarship on translation something analogous<sup>24</sup>. Kate Briggs in *This Little Art* writes on the democratising potential of the ‘at home’ translation, and then the sharing of knowledge that might follow. (Briggs, 2017, p219-220) And the time taken for learning, for testing, for finding-out will be valuable, as will be the knowledge that is passed on. (Briggs, 2017, p220)<sup>25</sup> This is time for self-growth, for understanding how we might exist as empathetic individuals.

The time taken over the production of texts or paintings serve then, as preparation for living empathetically. To return to Amy Sillman,

‘The work that we do is dependent on the idea of the self as a spokesperson, whether it’s through the body, the imagination, or the intellect. It seems to me that idea of ethics in general and empathy comes out of the idea of the individual. That’s not the kind of a bankrupt bourgeois individualism that exploits.’ (Sillman, 2007, p19)

The key to this ethics is the ‘attentiveness’ that Harman says is required of the spectator. This attentiveness allows the viewer to ‘trigger’ the artwork encounter. This attentiveness to one’s surroundings needs to be adopted for all encounters, so as to navigate the world less destructively.

This tentative ethical position was developed whilst thinking through my practice and in the next chapter I will outline an overview of the practical research I have undertaken, the translations I have made. These are both the translations from artwork encounter to text and from stimuli-encounter to painting. I examine the form of ekphrasis for a background on aesthetic textual responses to artwork before proposing my own method based on metaphor, intimacy, science fiction and abstraction.

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<sup>24</sup> This comparison with translation is a fruitful one and I believe provides opportunity for further study.

<sup>25</sup> If we are looking for existing political movements that we could attach this too, perhaps Italian Autonomist Marxism, which is bottom-up and relies on self-organising smaller groups rather than being part of a larger structure. Or the ecofeminism of Yayo Herrero, with its insistence on allowing for periods of regeneration and social inclusion, though sadly much of Herrero’s work is yet to be translated into English.

# Chapter Five

## Summary of Practical Research

### Abstract

In this chapter I adopt a more personal tone and give an overview of the practical research I have undertaken. I begin by briefly recapping the philosophical work undertaken, and its implications, namely that the correct response to the third object is an aesthetic one, and the methodology that this assertion lead me to adopting, namely the writing of fiction.

This chapter also acts as an introduction to the publications that accompany this thesis and some analysis of these fictions is included here, I outline the framework I gave myself for writing the text *The Battle of San Romano*, following my third object encounter with the painting of the same name. I also provide an introduction to four of the paintings I have made and the two exhibitions I organised and curated.

### Introduction

Following the philosophical investigation outlined in this thesis we have seen that in order to capture what I termed the Singular Echo of the artwork, we must focus on the artwork encounter. Through scrutiny of the philosophy of Graham Harman we have deduced that a third object is formed during this artwork encounter. This third object is composed of qualities of both the viewer and the art object and has its own reality, the task at hand now, is to determine how this object must be described.

In setting out his philosophy, Harman promises greater access to *objects in themselves*, asserting that philosophy must become more like the arts to gain this access. He is clear on this in the text *The Third Table*, and if we return to the passage quoted at the beginning of Chapter Two of this thesis we can see why:

‘On the one hand art does not function by dissolving white whales, mansions, rafts, apples, guitars, and windmills, into their subatomic underpinnings... ..On the other hand they also do not seek the first table, as if the arts merely replicated the objects of everyday life or sought to create effects on us... ..Instead, there is the attempt to establish objects deeper than the features through which they are announced, or allude to objects that cannot quite be made present.’ (Harman, 2012b, p14)

That is to say that the artistic or aesthetic response is the correct way to approach an object as it neither over nor undermines it. Instead making the object present to us through allusion. This is the only way Harman allows access to the objects that populate his ontology and the world.

“The world is filled primarily not with electrons or human praxis, but with ghostly objects withdrawing from all human and inhuman access, accessible only by allusion.” (Harman, 2012b, p12)

This Third Object then is one such object, and like all objects must be approached obliquely, through allusion, and described aesthetically.

The potential forms of this aesthetic response are manifold, and I have made a number of paintings responding to such encounters. *Helen* (Appendix Three, p. xiv) is one such painting and the process of its creation is described in more detail later in this chapter.

However, this thesis is concerned with how to better write about painting, so what then is an ‘aesthetic response’ in writing? How can we best write allusively?

In Chapter Two I examined writing about art and painting that I thought disappointed, either because it responded too ‘matter-of-factly’ to the artwork, or because it included the artwork in a larger schema, be that philosophy, sociology or the artist’s oeuvre. These textual responses all seemed to miss that which is singular about the artwork in question, and following our analysis of Harman we can say that this is because they chose to write about the artwork rather than the encounter, and because they tried to describe it rather than writing allusively.

In the previous chapter we looked at the potential of ekphrasis, and though we could certainly define a poetic response as an aesthetic one. It doesn’t seem allusive if the art object is simply described in more florid language, moreover as we saw the encounter with the artwork is ignored.

It is my contention that we must endorse a fictional response to the third object, i.e. a fictional response to the artwork encounter. Firstly, I understand fiction to mean that which allows the invention of the unreal, or that which didn’t happen. I believe that access to this alterity is vital, the writer has to have the freedom to do whatever they want in order to best capture what is singular about the third object. That might actually mean adopting an essayistic prose style, but then writing about something that wasn’t there, or that they didn’t see, if it better captures the nature of the encounter. Secondly, as it also allows the writer to take a multifarious approach to their subject, they can write in different registers.

And I say fiction rather than poetry as there is an implicit length to fiction, as well as an implicit fabrication, that isn’t there, (for me at least,) with the term poetry.

Personally, this meant for me writing in a style that would be classed as Speculative Fiction, or Science Fiction. My conclusion was that, as this third object is a new object, existing in a different world to our own, a method that is practised at unfolding different worlds, such as science-fiction, was the most appropriate method to assume when it comes to describing this new world.

Writing this kind of fiction allowed me to craft new worlds, with their own rules, narratives, characters and relationships. Within these worlds I was able to reflect the arrangement of intensities and moods I found within the artworks, so they might be read away from the artworks and allow the reader to re-enter the world of the encounter.

The implementation of Science fiction as my chosen form was one of five-pronged methodology I adopted, outlined in the speculative proposals for a methodology I made in the last chapter. These were Metaphor, Personal Narrative, Intimacy, Science Fiction and Abstraction.

All of these can be thought of as different ways of approaching the third object and believe they can be used separately or together to create a Third Object text for the encounter.

Actually, the methodology I advocate is to combine these methods, to pick and choose, to write a personal narrative that describes the encounter with the artwork but to describe the artwork metaphorically, to describe it as a completely different object, to abstract the way it looks, to get close to it, to think about how it makes you feel, to think of something else, or someone else, that makes you feel like that, and then describe that instead. To invent a new language, as I did in *Morta Della*, to try and speak like the artwork.

That the way to capture that which is singular about the artwork is to write something singular in itself: Primarily because it retains the 'magic' of the encounter, or what I have called the singular echo of the artwork-encounter by emphasising its alterity.

Fiction is the only form that gives us the freedom to do just that.

## **Encounters**

So, to return to the four encounters I set out in the introduction to the thesis:

1. The encountering of something (stimuli) I think should be painted
3. The encounter with an artwork (spectating)

Are both encounters that we can think through OOO and deduce that both encounters lead us, (beholder,) to merge with the object we are encountering. As we have seen Harman has said: 'The aesthetic unit contains the object and the spectator to an equal degree, and cannot be obtained by fumigating one or the other out of existence.' (Harman, 2016, p215) The ramification of this is that the other two encounters, namely;

2. The act of making a painting of that stimuli
4. Writing a text about an artwork

Are actually better conceived when being about the encounter, rather than the subject encountered. They are about the third object formed by the encounter,



not the object that is encountered: It is not the stimuli I have chosen to paint but the moment of encountering it that is the subject. Likewise, it is not the artwork that should be written about, as the artwork will always slip a definition, it cannot be paraphrased in words. In the same manner photographing or even painting photo-realistically the thing that has inspired a painting, would not be sufficient to capture its appeal.

This is the third object / singular echo.

I will talk about my practice in terms of this third object, how I create paintings that are a description of the collision between the real object that I am and the sensible objects that 'stick' to me in any encounter with any given stimulus. Abstraction and science fiction will play a role in this discussion – as both are models for world building.

It would seem contradictory to follow Harman in believing aesthetics offer a refreshing template for philosophy, but then insist that the creative work I produced must follow a didactic structure. After all one of the reasons I was attracted to Object philosophy was because of statements such as the one of Ian Bogost; 'characterisation of an experience though supposedly objective evidence and external mechanisms leads us farther from, not closer to, an understanding of the experience of an entity.' (Bogost, 2012 p63)

Likewise, I am not going to submit the work I made to the kind of analysis that I dedicated a chapter (Chapter Two) to decrying.

However, there are some parameters developed organically through the writing of the texts, through my practical research that is, that I can explicate here. And there is a framework that I worked through that it will be useful to share.

During my study I have wanted to approach the application of philosophy to practice, from a number of sides. I have wanted to use it dynamically; to influence what I will produce, and this has primarily been in the form of writing; in the fictional texts I have produced for object-encounters. However, I have also used Harman retroactively, to consider artwork and my painting practice through the prism of OOO and found that similarly insightful. The key takeaway from this process was: If I thought about what sparked a painting off in my mind, if we think that the process began with me seeing something and thinking I should paint it, OOO helped me realise that it was *this moment* that I was actually trying to paint; the moment of wanting to make a painting and not the thing I was witnessing.

The notion that I am actually trying to paint the object I was in when I encountered the stimuli, made sense to me. And to follow my painting practice when it comes to writing about a painting I need to describe the moment when I become enmeshed with the qualities of the painting that entrapped me.

As my study has encompassed both painting and writing, and indeed the curation of a group show, I have separated the following chapter into sections on each of these modalities. As I have said the writing was most influenced by OOO in terms of production, whereas the influence on painting was

retrospective, in terms of how I think about it. I am going to work through the writing first, followed by the painting and then the exhibitions.

I have chosen to include images of my paintings, but not images of the artworks / encounters / things that I have written the third object texts for. (Though I have given a brief description of them.) I have taken this decision as it seemed in keeping with the nature of the study and the inspirations for the third object texts can always be sought out by an interested reader.

## **Writing**

### **Introduction to the Third Object texts**

Following Harman, I looked to an aesthetic approach for my method for writing the third object texts and found inspiration within my painting practice. I decided to write about a subject in the manner that I painted about a subject: Thinking through the philosophy of Harman I realised that when I encounter the stimulus of a painting (the thing that I see and want to paint), I am not trying to paint that stimulus, but instead am trying to paint the desire to try to paint that stimulus.

If the moment of encounter with the stimuli of a painting, is the same phenomena that makes writing about painting difficult, to follow my painting practice I need to describe the moment when I become enmeshed with the sensual qualities of the painting that entrap me. This is how I would best describe being inside the third object or how to capture the singular echo of the artwork. This is the very real impact that my understanding of Harman's philosophy has had on my writing practice.

As I have shown, this third object is a composite of both myself as spectator, activating the work, and the Sensual Qualities of the painting or encountered artwork. As well as containing the Sensual Qualities of the artwork, I as the Real Object, providing the 'reality principle' am there. It followed that I, as spectator, would have to be represented somehow in these texts, me performing mimesis of whatever it was I was encountering.

This mimesis means that it is a new object, non-existent in our world, that has been created by the encounter. As we thought through this concept with abstraction it seemed appropriate that the texts should have this tenor, it follows that if this is a new world, one that hadn't previously existed, science-fiction was the most appropriate way of writing about this object.

A question I had to answer; what was more important to me? The art object that provoked the action or the text I was writing. In keeping with the 'aesthetic' approach, (following Harman's definition of aesthetic,) I was endorsing, I wanted to push the text as far as possible to make it a 'good' text, otherwise I don't think the response would've been honestly 'aesthetic'.

This means that the texts do differ in tone, as they were sometimes approached differently. Below I provide a detailed mapping of how I approached writing one

text, *The Battle of San Romano* and the pieces *Morta Della* and *The Polycephalus* will be addressed in a section below on the two exhibition I organised to present my research. Before that I will work through more general points in accompaniment to the collection.

In each text I tried to harness the hypothesis of the third object a little differently, for example referring to the object encountered more directly; including biographical and autobiographical detail; writing in the third person plural, etc.

Often, I would start with what might be termed the ‘intensities and moods’ of what I was looking at; to think composition in abstract terms. These were the Sensual Qualities that struck me, that I found within the artworks, and tried to imitate in text so they might be read away from the artworks and allow the reader to re-enter the world of the encounter.

I used these intensities and moods to build the world of the particular third object I wanted to describe, making them real, or providing the reality principle in Harman’s words by having characters explore this world.

In some cases, I used the space of the text to bring in some of the wider issues of the study, for instance, in *The Zoo*, written for the paintings of Olarn Chiaravonant I write about the differences between poetry and painting limited by Lessing, that is their temporal and spatial qualities. *The Zoo* was also important as I used a secondary work; *The Master of Go* by Yasunari Kawabata to create another frame for the text. My interpretation of Harman’s philosophy meant that I took the book that I was reading at the time, as part of me as Real Object. I took the book that I was reading into the third object, in formed part of this new object alongside the other parts of me and the observed paintings. I moved the traditional discussion on the differences between painting and writing to a board game to give myself a new arena in which to talk about it; the board of the game became a ‘neutral’ space to interrogate this difference, by providing a control or comparison for both. If in *He Collects Writing* I reflected on the imaginative act, here I used the space of the text to examine the act of trying to find difference in the literary and the visual. Reflecting overtly in the text on traditional distinctions of space and time, with painting providing the former and poetry the latter. Introducing the board game gave me a third form to reflect on this, the encounter between two players within the game, reflecting the enmeshing of spectator, artwork within the third object. I was also interested, contra Lessing in the spatial qualities of the text, both by creating a memorable space, a space like those I find in the abstract work of the painter Chiaravonant, whose work was the subject of the text, but also in the text as a place for discussion. This text is interesting, or perhaps problematic, for another matter, that I am writing about a number of paintings, a series of Chiaravonant’s work. This might seem hypocritical given the weight I placed on the need to write texts for a specific, individual, artworks, but I wanted to test the buoyancy of my strategy in other ways. I looked for a common Singular Echo across all the work, finding it in the shapes that looked both organic but unearthly; abnatural is the word I coined to describe it in the text.

The text *The Plant, The Wolf, The Great Aunt* was written for the encounter with a houseplant, following the associations to wherever they might lead. I wanted to write about a non-art object to see if this changed the way I wrote. Perhaps inevitably as I was writing about something without creative content, I put more autobiographical details into the story. This would fit with the framework of the third object theory of spectatorship; as there are perhaps less Sensual Qualities to a houseplant than to a painting by Uccello, as an artist is creating a sensorial experience, something that makes temporary palliative for the anguish and blindness that we have to live through.' (Sillman, 2007, p54) Whereas a plant seems more quotidian and then the spectator places more of themselves within the echo. There is less of the encountered object, (in this case the plant,) taking up space within the third object. In fact, this story felt so different I decided to leave it out of the collection of third object texts I have self-published as a research outcome, though it can be read at the end of this thesis in Appendix Two.

### ***The Battle of San Romano***

This three-part prose-poem was written for the Uccello painting of the same name. This is the only third object text that has the same title as the object it is written for. The original triptych is scattered so the three panels are now in different countries, one is *The National Gallery*, London, one the *Louvre* in Paris and one the *Uffizi*, Florence.

Though I was interested in providing an 'oblique' text for the painting I did describe directly things within the paintings, it's Sensual Qualities. This began with the sepulchral quality of the light;  
*ethereal and extra-terrestrial.*

The following lines from the text also describe elements within the painting,  
*there were gaps of light in the hedge winking in front of him like stars in the firmament.*  
*Under the nearest hedge he could see what he thought was a turtle, but it might also have been a rock.*  
*In the distance blots of shrubbery peppered the fields, growing slowly, steadily, reluctant to expend too much energy under the blast of the sun.*  
*There were no birds in the picture.*  
*hemispheres of three oranges, still on the vine.*

At other times, I was reflecting on and alluding to the mood of the panels.  
*restrained, an old-fashioned party perhaps.*  
*Rural in atmosphere, like dark pastoral tales,*  
*Flags hung*  
*melancholy face*

The following was written for the panel in Paris,  
*creased, tired*  
*rolled up, travelled, evening falling through his features.*

As this is the panel in the Louvre, this is also a reflection of the institution's policy of not restoring their collection. Likewise,

### *The sky was cropped*

Refers to the Medici family cutting the top off the panels, so they might fit better in their residence. As well as referring to the physical condition, I ended with some of the history of the paintings,

*'Yes, that's right; we've all ended up living in different countries.'*

I aligned the three texts so that they correspond to the orientation of the original panel, the London panel is left aligned, Paris right and Florence centre. I also chose to include them in the order I saw them, rather than the order in which they would've been arranged when originally painted. This is the beginning of me providing the 'reality principle' which continued with me personifying the three panels in three distinct brothers, (obviously related as they are brothers,) this is the 'mimesis' I perform.

## **Painting**

### ***APATSS\****

During the three years of doctoral research preceding my 'writing-up year' I made 73 paintings, thumbnails of all of them are in Appendix Three. The first 61 were a continuation of a series I had already begun that I called APATSS, (All Paintings Are The Same Size,) and was 100 paintings that were either 30 x 25 cm or 25 x 30 cm, the other 15 paintings I will address in the exhibition section below.

APATSS was a series of work in which I wanted to document the urge that I thought 'paintable', every painting came from a moment that I saw or felt that something should be painted as I couldn't describe in words. It would be a taxonomical record of these moments.

The decision to limit myself to one size was a complex one but many of my concerns regarding why to stick to this size were related to the concerns of this thesis. Firstly, using the same size implied an equivalence between the 'sources' of the painting, it doesn't matter if I am inspired to make a painting by the oeuvre of Leonardo Da Vinci or by a page from a magazine I find in the street. It is a flat ontology of these moments. The size of these paintings is also an intimate size, in the last chapter I have already compared the intimacy of reading with Mitchell's' notion of the intimacy of abstraction.

I will now write in more detail about four paintings from the APATSS series.

### ***Helen***

(Appendix Three, p. xiv)

When I visited the Prado and was beguiled by the dynamic composition of the painting 'The Abduction of Helen' by Tintoretto, the painting withdrew, (to narrate the genesis of one of this painting in Harmanesque terms,) behind this

compositional quality; the diagonals of the ships smashing together at the base of the painting with the lines of the masts above it captured me. In fact, I would struggle to describe the action of the figures within from memory as I was totally disinterested in that when I looked at it. The third object that had formed here contains me as Real Object and the Sensual Quality that is the diagonal composition, attached to me as I perform the mimetic act that Harman describes, and this is what I was trying to paint in my picture Helen. But I brought more to this third object than my presence, I brought my own memories of Venice, and I realised I wanted my painting to have its liquidity and precariousness (structurally speaking.) I adopted a rheumy uncertain quality to the handling of the paint.

### ***Madrid***

(Appendix Three, p. vi)

This 'irreducible' moment that inspired a lot of my paintings could be described as Helen was above; that an encounter with something has hidden behind its composition. Or the formal elements that have composed whatever it is that I have seen have leered forward and for a moment I am disarmed by what I am looking at. It is perhaps simple to think of being struck by the composition of a painting, after all the composition is an innate part of it. But the experience I am talking about also happens with anything I could see, so when I visited Madrid and went walking. The elements that struck me were the artificially coloured and shaped forms within the natural landscape at dusk. And resulted in the painting shown. It is worth noting that I made preparatory drawings for this painting to better isolate what it was about the encounter that arrested me. Refining the shapes that I wanted to use within the artwork, working up my relationship with the Sensual Qualities.

The Sensual Qualities that strike the spectator are dependent on the artists' facture, back history, education etc. and the spectator themselves. As we have already seen though, the specificity of the spectator and the artwork make these encounters indissociable but in making work for the encounter rather than what is being looked at, a more faithful translation of the viewed object is possible.

### ***Crash***

(Appendix Three, p. viii)

This third object or pre-painting encounter can also be triggered by a phrase, when I read Crash by JG Ballard, the following sentence caused me to start. 'As I took her arm she stared through my face at the dark branches of the trees over my head.' (This was the title I used for the show I curated in Italy.)

The mental image I had as I read the story was disrupted by the way this sentence is worded, the head of the narrator is looked through to something that is simultaneously above and behind. The implication is that the woman taken by the arm is somehow seeing the branches behind the narrator at the same time as his head. Interestingly here the third object I merge with is one created within my own consciousness, the fictional objects of the novel are still objects

according to Harman's metaphysics, so this is still possible in this analysis. It could be analogous to finding inspirations for paintings within a drawing practice.

### ***Evening Class***

(Appendix Three, p. v)

Evening Class is a painting of a plant. The title actually draws on the three disparate qualities that I was joined with when I looked at the plant.

It is so-called because it is the type of activity and painting one would undertake if one were doing an evening class in painting, and as I am someone who has taught and studied in a number of art schools I can't really look at house plants without seeing them as a still-life prop, (though I did try a different direction in the third object Text, *The Plant, The Wolf, The Great Aunt.*) And I decided that it would be painted with a vernacular realism, typical of a part-time painter; the type who would enrol on an evening class.

I am not only encountering the physical or perceptual characteristics of the plant but also associative connotations, such as the plant makes me think of evening classes, these associations are those that activate when I encounter the plant. I wanted to reflect this in the painting style I adopted.

But also, I had the plant in my bedroom so would often see it in the evening or at night, so I wanted to paint the background darker with the touches of fluorescent green behind the leaves to capture the way waxy leaves can luminesce in a sepulchral half-light.

### **Exhibitions**

In the 'writing-up year' of my thesis I have organised two exhibitions to present my research. *AS I TOOK HER ARM SHE STARED THROUGH MY FACE AT THE DARK BRANCHES OF THE TREES OVER MY HEAD* and *Cap Gros*.

#### ***AS I TOOK HER ARM SHE STARED THROUGH MY FACE AT THE DARK BRANCHES OF THE TREES OVER MY HEAD***

(Appendix Three, p. xxv - xxvi)

I wanted to curate and organise *AS I TOOK HER ARM SHE STARED THROUGH MY FACE AT THE DARK BRANCHES OF THE TREES OVER MY HEAD* to answer the following question: If my research thus far had been into writing about painting, then I wanted to approach it from the opposite angle; how do we paint about writing? I invited five other painters; Christiane Bergelt, Olarn Chiaravanont, Rasmus Nilausen, Catherine Parsonage, Ross Taylor whose work seemed to me to have a direct relationship with words or writing or reading. This might be because of what I knew about them personally, about their practice, or what was obvious from looking at their work. I invited them to

make new work for the exhibition or choose pieces that seemed relevant to the concept.

To accompany the exhibition I wrote a text, *The Polycephalus*. As I was writing for an exhibition rather than an individual artwork I built this text differently to the others. The world of this particular narrative was further inspired by interviews conducted by email with the five other artists in the months preceding the exhibition. Indeed, their answers built into how I understood the shape the exhibition would take so the exhibition and the text grew symbiotically. We began these interviews with the question of how to paint about writing and continued from there. Their answers to my questions, my questions, shared jokes, salutations, asides, references, were then all pasted into one document that I collaged into a cogent whole, adding very little, to create the story. As well as document of and for the exhibition this whole becomes a general reflection on the practice of painting.

The exhibition became a bit like the inside of my head, as in the months leading up to the exhibition I interviewed the painters involved and simultaneously I selected the work of theirs I wanted to exhibit. During the show the only text available to visitors to the gallery was *The Polycephalus*, giving me a chance to put my hypothesis into practice in a radical fashion.

### ***Cap Gros***

(Appendix Three, p. xxvii - xxviii)

As my research had incorporated both textual and painted responses to third object encounters I wanted to find an object to encounter and respond with both a fiction and paintings. I chose the Romanesque artwork of Catalunya.

(Appendix Three, p. xvii - xxiii)

I worked more systematically here, in that I did a number of drawings in *Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya*, Barcelona, (where most of the artworks are,) alongside making notes that resulted in the text *Morta Della*. I was interested in how the process of painting and writing this third object were different, if they were. This proved to be true and I was drawn to different Sensual Qualities when I was there as a writer than as a painter. As a writer I wanted to capture the violence, and humour in what I was looking at. The phrase 'rictus grin' would be one way of describing the tenor of the murals. To a twenty first century viewer there is something absurd about the fantastical animals that are depicted there. As a painter the Sensual Qualities that drew me in, the details that I did drawings of, were the hands, the eyes, the visuality, not its effect.

To this end I made a risograph publication containing prints of the drawings alongside the text. (I have submitted a copy of the publication.) I think perhaps one impact of writing the text meant there was even less narrative content in my paintings, or it is included more idiosyncratically.

I produced a subsequent 15 paintings from the drawings I made. Eight of these paintings were included with the publication *Morta Della* in an exhibition at 38b projects, London.



## **Summary**

Though I have been reluctant to give a thorough explication of the practical work I have made, because by doing so I would invalidate the very reason I began this study; that seeking to paraphrase an artwork with a critical analysis misses the singular echo of the artwork and leaves the reader further from the artwork, I have shown in this chapter that the practical work I have made is clearly linked to my understanding of the issues of the philosophical thesis.

Furthermore, I wouldn't have approached the writing in the manner I did were it not for the philosophy of Harman which lead me to think through my writing practice with my painting practice.

The three forms painting, writing and philosophy, became more and more interlinked as the thesis continued, as one form influenced another.

# Conclusions

## General Conclusions

In the introduction to this thesis I explicated a problem common to much of the writing about art, namely that it misses what might be called the nub of the artwork; that about the artwork which appeals most to us. I diagnosed that the ‘root-cause’ of this failure to capture the nub is that the writers of these texts believe that this nub is simply too elusive, that it cannot be caught, that art is of a different order to language, and therefore the nub is ineffable. This failure or lack is most egregious when reading the description of an individual artwork. Rather than trying to describe the appeal of said artwork, writers instead tend to bundle it into an oeuvre or a movement or a biography or a sociohistorical trend. If the individual artwork is approached it is described prosaically, because as previously noted, that which appeals is thought to be of a different order and therefore indescribable in words. The variety of these ‘failures’ was examined in depth in Chapter Two.

The nub; that which has been missed I called the singular Echo. The ‘singular’ as I was keen that writing addressed the appeal of artwork, (singular,) and that it was attempted on a ‘case by case’ basis. I wanted writing that would reflect the intimacy of an encounter with an individual artwork. I took the notion of the echo from the literature of translation, as it is the echo that Walter Benjamin believes the accomplished translator must listen for.

Translation proved a key analogy with the task of writing for art, with its emphasis on intimacy and on finding a new form for what is singular about an artwork. The translator of the artwork can find the words to make the ineffable effable by focussing on the artwork encounter. The writer on art must be a translator of an artwork’s singular echo. A translator rather than a transcriber of formal or material qualities. A translator rather than a utiliser of an artwork’s context, instrumentalising it for another purpose. A translator rather than a cod-psychologist, looking for biographical clues within an artwork.

I reached this conclusion through reflection on my own practice alongside analysis and investigation of the Object Oriented philosophy of Graham Harman. I worked through his ontology until I arrived at what I term his ‘third object thesis’ of spectatorship, in which the spectator and artwork are fused together in a third object, that might be thought of as the artwork encounter. It became clear that being able to describe this third object would mean being able to capture the singular echo of an artwork.

When faced with the task of describing this third object I elucidated fiction as the only proper response and outlined a methodology and framework for the writing of such fiction.

These fictional responses were compiled in a collection that accompanies this thesis. Two of the stories had their own specific supplementary publications that were also submitted for examination. Each of these supplementary publications

were printed for two exhibitions that I organised to publish my research. One, Cap Gros, showed paintings made in response to the third object I formed with the Romanesque artwork of Catalunya. The other AS I TOOK HER ARM SHE STARED THROUGH MY FACE AT THE DARK BRANCHES OF THE TREES OVER MY HEAD I curated and organised in Yellow, (a project space for painting in Varese, Italy.) The show featured six painters; Christiane Bergelt, Olarn Chiaravanont, Rasmus Nilausen, Catherine Parsonage, Ross Taylor and myself: Artists whose work seemed to me to have a direct relationship with words or writing or reading.

### **Summary of the thesis**

In the first chapter of this thesis I introduced the philosophy of Harman, its roots and terminology that I have then used throughout the thesis. I focussed in detail on his concepts undermining, overmining and duoming; these are how Harman classes that reductive strategies that objects have previously suffered at the hand of philosophy. As part of this work, I showed later how Harman's solution to object encounters, to change - his so-called thesis of 'vicarious causation' - is also key to understanding how experience operates, specifically how experience-as-painter, and experience-as-spectator functions. In this chapter, I used Harman's influences, namely the phenomenologists Heidegger and Husserl to explain his worldview. I believe his concepts of withdrawal and emergence are better understood with knowledge of Heidegger's tool analysis and Husserl's concept of intentionality. From this base I explained the Fourfold structure that Harman believes exists within all objects and highlighted the key relations within it for the rest of the study, the relation that Harman classes as Allure.

In Chapter Two I have shown how opinions on painting and writing about painting often serve to overmine or undermine the object-quality of specific paintings. I critiqued over contextualisation, but also the opposite move that provides a straight-forward description of artworks. I identified a vicious circle in relation to these methods that I termed the analytical roundabout and, showed that Harman provides a way 'off' this 'roundabout.' I showed that the failings of these forms of writing led to the popularity of Speculative Realism within a strain of contemporary art debate, and education.

The work I did in Chapter Three, showed that despite the assumption of a post-humanist flavour to Harman's philosophy his take on spectatorship is fundamentally different to this: Focussing instead on a radical interpretation of mimesis is offers significant novel resources for spectator theory and a philosophy of art writing. The process of painting, and spectating were viewed through the lens of Harman's 'third object thesis.' In so doing I showed how Harman's perspective on spectatorship is different to other well recognised models - Heidegger, Greenberg, Fried - and through this take on mimesis a methodology for 'adequate' art-writing was developed. I did significant work here identifying this 'third object thesis' within the ever-changing and evolving philosophy of Harman, this meant following him from Guerilla Metaphysics

published 2005 to his redefining of his position on Ortega y Gasset in Dante's Broken Hammer, published 2016, via a recording of his paper at a choreography conference in 2012 at MACBA in Barcelona, in which he explained his realisation of the implications of his model on spectatorship.

I used Harman to provide a definition of painting and, therefore, of the encounter with painting. Painting and encounter, are as we saw, indissociable from this perspective, are joined in a third object.

Describing this third object, that is the encounter between viewer and artwork, that contains elements of both, fused together, allows a writer to describe the singular echo of an artwork. In Chapter Four I divined strategies for this task of describing the third object. I stayed faithful to the tenets of Harman's philosophy, which meant that as an object in its own right, the third object had to be approached obliquely, this meant it had to be described aesthetically, which mean fiction became the most appropriate method for writing about an artwork.

I then thought through the third object in relation to fiction, specifically Science-fiction. I developed a series of speculative techniques and strategies for producing these third object writings, incorporating four modes; metaphor, personal narrative, abstraction and intimacy. I considered traditional forms of ekphrasis in contrast to my own ekphrasis for the artwork encounter, that I termed associative ekphrasis. I worked through Stephen Cheeke's analysis of traditional ekphrasis explicating the fundamental point of divergence, that traditional ekphrasis concentrates on a physical description of the artwork that is its subject. But found convergence, if Cheeke's concept of 'conjunctioning' was stretched a little, so that it might mean trying to take in the whole (artwork) at once. Then the deterritorialization that follows would be thought as part of the sensorial experience of that artwork encounter, and it is this that I am providing my ekphrastic responses for.

At the end of the Chapter Four, despite my critique of contextual-political readings of artworks, as forms of overmining, I identify an alternative aesthetic ethics to my third object thesis drawn from the writing of Jane Bennet and Susan Sontag and based on a notion of living more consciously, rooted in the non-hierarchical nature of a flat ontology and my painting practice.

In Chapter Five I have shown that despite not wanting to undermine my research by 'explaining' my artwork in detail that the philosophical and practical research were interlinked with one contributing to the other. I recapped the implications of Harman's thought on the four encounters I identified as being fundamental to this study, but also on art criticism in general. I made the caveat that a total explication of my practical research would be fruitless, but I was able to give the framework I used when writing the third object texts and mobilised the terminology of Harman to explain my painterly decisions. I explained in detail the influences of the painting on the text, *The Battle of San Romano*, (written for the painting of the same name.) I also included analysis of the two exhibitions I curated and organised as part of the study as well as four of the paintings made.

## Finally

This thesis has laid an effective strategy and philosophical framework for writing creatively as art criticism and performing practice as research. The more specific findings, though justified philosophically, are personal to me, but I believe that the framework I have outlined before that is applicable and usable by many.

As noted in the introduction I am a voracious reader of fiction. To quote Rebecca Solnit again:

‘Like many others who turned into writers, I disappeared into books when I was very young, disappeared into them like someone running into the woods... ...Before writers are writers they are readers, living in books, through books, in the lives of others that are also the heads of others, in that act that is so intimate and yet so alone.’ (Solnit, 2013, p60)

I see myself very much in here; disappeared into books and the world of words, as into a wood. Leaving the forest only when I encounter that which seems to me to defy language, and contriving to make a painting of it, almost in testament to the fact that there is life outside of these ‘woods.’

It is a strange and pleasant coincidence that Benjamin also used the forest or the woods as his metaphor for translation. These woods though are impenetrable, and the writer cannot enter, must listen for the echo of their words. The words that sound right in echo to them, and only to them, because as we have seen it is an intimate relationship.

And like an intimate relationship this is a very personal project, how could it be anything else when I am fictionalising my own encounters in words and paint.

But it is very personal project that has been sieved through a very impersonal process, doctoral study and analysis of contemporary philosophy. And I am passionate about the results, both in terms of the practical work I have made in painting and writing, but also the philosophical work I have done; creating a framework for a rigorous defence of practice as research.

And I do believe that it is in the sense that this is a ‘personal’ project that there is a kernel of an ethics, a blueprint for ‘attentive’ living. This is firstly because it emphasises a more considered kind of existence as I have already shown in Chapter Four but also because it relies of the strength of subjective responses to artworks. This is a multidimensional subjectivity as theorist Donna Haraway would put it. (Haraway, 1988, p586)

These third object texts do not pretend to be objective, they know that knowledge is situated, and accept they can only be partial, but they encourage others to do the same; to empathise with who or what surrounds them, to listen for the singular echo that is emitted.

‘All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference

and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view, even when the other is our own machine.'  
(Haraway, 1988, p583)

Which is to say, everyone should write their own fictions for artworks.

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# Appendix One

## Further analysis of Harman and his influences

### i. Harman's Ontography

Here I provide further details of the intricacies of Harman's ontology, the relations that exist between the four poles delimited in Chapter One; the study of which Harman calls Ontography.

#### Ontography

Within the Fourfold there are a number of possible relationships that might occur between the profiles. Harman classes the study of these as Ontography. I will work through these, explaining their significance to Harman, but without interrogating them too fully as they have not proved relevant to the rest of the study. However, I am including them here so as to give further context should it be necessary.

The diagram at the end of this section is taken from Peter Wolfendale's book, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes*, that though a polemical critique of Harman's philosophy, does contain the clearest diagram, showing all ten possible links.

The four most important relations (Harman, 2011b) to Harman are the tensions, occurring between the four profiles that he classed as The Fourfold.

#### Tensions

Harman's evaluation of Heidegger's tool analysis provides him with one of his tensions; that between a Real Object and its Sensual Qualities; that the Real Object has Sensual Qualities that are omitted from the withdrawn Real Object, a Real Object that is autonomous from whatever encounters it. Harman calls this Tension, Space. The way one may think of a city without being in it or visit it and not exhaust it is how Harman begins to define Space. As a site of relation and non-relation.

As the Real Object is withdrawn we cannot know it, but as it is distinct it must contain Real Qualities. This then is another tension, that between a Real Object and its Real Qualities, that is what distinguishes it from others, or the world at large, how we know we are not gesturing toward an abyss or an underlying plasmatic essence. For this Harman relies on Leibniz's Monads and an assertion by Leibniz that though each Monad must be individual it must also contain qualities so as not to be interchangeable with another. This tension is that which makes things themselves, in whatever form that may be, Harman calls this tension Essence.

We cannot 'ever exhausts the reality of another, never makes contact with the darkest residues of its heart' (Harman, 2002, p283)

As we might expect as it concerns the Sensual Object and therefore the phenomenological world, Harman finds the other two tensions in Husserl. As noted Sensual Objects differ from all the ways in which they appear to us in the form of their Qualities. Their Qualities are present within the Sensual Object but also separate from it, the object simultaneously has them and exists without them, we see a tree, not greens and browns that it consists of. Harman calls this tension Time. That is to say Harman asserts that Time is the tension between a Sensual Object and its Sensual Qualities. An object appears in a number of different guises to us, disguised or occluded by light, it might look different in the morning or afternoon, today or tomorrow: 'In all phenomenal experience, there is a tension between sensual objects and their sensual qualities. The ocean remains the same though its successive waves advance and recede.' (Harman, 2011b, p26)

The other tension is between the Sensual Object and its Real Qualities. Harman agrees with Husserl that there must be something real beneath the Sensual Object that we perceive when we look at the world, something tying the thing together, as it were. Harman follows Husserl in labelling this Eidos, we can intuit that there is something that distinguishes this object but as these Qualities are Real they are withdrawn so we can only intuit them, never know them completely. As Sparrow puts it: 'Sensual objects possess real, that is, necessary, qualities beyond the contingently sensual – this is what makes a rabbit this particular rabbit.' (Sparrow, 2014, p120)

## **Radiations and Junctions**

Harman further brackets together the links he believes to be related. There are three, those that exist between Qualities, that orbit the Sensual Object that he classes as Radiations. The remaining three links exist as Junctions, these are how the Real Object may encounter other objects. This cannot be the case with Qualities as they exist only in relation to an Object, where the Qualities of one Object to form a relation with the Qualities of another Object we would be left with another Object.

So the three Radiations are as follows:

Sensual Quality with Sensual Quality is Emanation as they are emanating from the Sensual Object

Real Quality with Real Quality is Contraction as though these Qualities are linked to the Sensual Object they withdraw from it and each other.

Sensual Quality with Real Quality is Duplicity as both belong to the Sensual Object that might have little relation to one another beyond this.

And the three Junctions are:

The link between Sensual Object and Sensual Object is Contiguity; as they are related as being in the same Sensual World that a Real Object is experiencing and mediated by that Real Object. (Harman, 2011, 134)

The link between Real Object and Real Object is Withdrawal because as explained all Real Objects withdraw from one another.

The link between the Real Object and the Sensual Object, which he labels Sincerity. As such as it is the only example of two objects encountering one another; this is real lived experience, as we know, we as real objects exist in a world containing the sensual profiles of other Real Objects.

### **Change: Fission and Fusion**

So how do Objects change rather than remaining the static entities that have been described; how do Objects isolated from any interaction become something different? Harman is very clear that one point which distinguishes his Ontology from those sciences and philosophies that he accuses of overmining the object is that they cannot explain change. If all of an object is used up in its contextual relations then there is nothing kept back that might induce change; if all the facets of something are interlocked with the world as it is, then nothing 'moves'. (Kimbell & Harman, 2013) He has to prove that his work provides answers to the question of change.

To begin his explanation Harman incorporates ideas of Fission and Fusion, and pairs off his tensions, giving two of them to Fission and two of them to Fusion. Fission are those between a Sensual Object and its Real and Sensual Qualities, I.e. Time and Eidos. And Fusion are those between a Real Object and its Real and Sensual Qualities. i.e. Space and Essence. Harman explains this distinction as follows, as the Real Object is permanently withdrawn, even from its qualities; it is both more and less a sum of its parts; that for it to join with its qualities involves Fusion. As the Sensual Object is permanently connected to its qualities, as they are necessary for it to appear in the world, and how it appears in the world, any change here would involve Fission.

Harman goes further into explaining these stages of Fission and Fusion, delineating and naming the different types of which can occur. The Fission that occurs as part of Time, (the tension between a Sensual Object and its Sensual Qualities,) Harman labels Confrontation. This is when that Object we are looking at loses some of its qualities, he uses the example of realising that the Sensual tree we saw had actually been used as gallows so Qualities such as its colour and texture are no longer of interest to us, we see the tree in a different light, (literally and metaphorically.)

The Fission that splits the relation that is Eidos, (between a Sensual Object and its Real Qualities,) is Theory. Harman uses the example of the electrical current that we can deduce runs through the Sensual Object of the copper wiring we encounter. In making that deduction we have separated the Sensual Object from one of its Real Qualities I.e. Its conductivity.

In Space as Harman defines it, when a Real Object fuses with its Sensual Qualities, what occurs is Allure. These is when we catch a rare glimpse of the Real Object, this is an aesthetic process according to Harman and indeed does occur in artworks. Harman explains this process at length and with reference to metaphor and I will also return to this in some detail in my analysis of the third object in Chapter Three.

The Fusion associated with Essence, (between a Real Object and its Real Qualities,) is classed as Causation by Harman when the previous withdrawn Object and



Qualities and brought together in a manner that changes the Real Object. Harman states that this happens in a manner similar to Allure. (Harman, 2011b, p105)

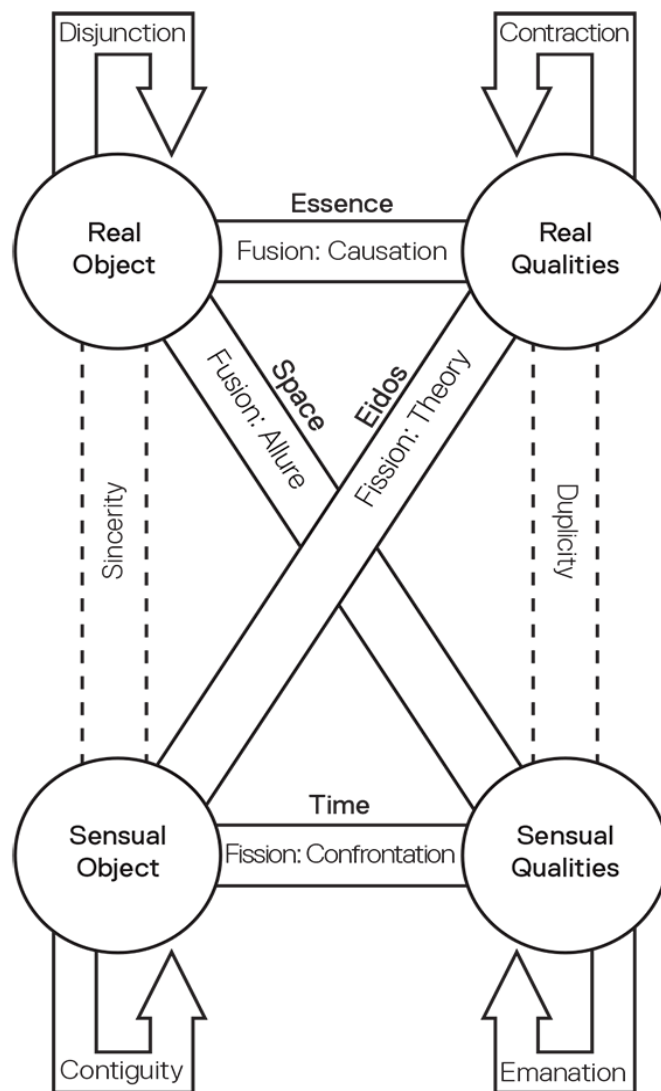


Diagram taken from Wolfendale, P. (2014) *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes*, Falmouth: Urbanomic

## ii. Van Gogh's shoes and The Origin of The Work of Art

As this thesis includes a significant amount of detail on Heidegger we will return to him here to analyse his essay *The Origin of The Work of Art*, both in terms of Harman but also in the context of Chapter Two, in which I apply Harman's concepts of Over and Undermining to art writing.

Heidegger writes well on art, searching for a proper way of understanding its ineffability. This proper method, one that we have distilled through Harman, is visible in Heidegger. It is also interesting to uncover more of the roots of Harman's philosophy in Heidegger. We will look briefly at his essay *The Origin of The Work of Art*, described by Peter Wolfendale as 'masterful' (Wolfendale, 2014, p81,) and Harman précised as: 'While tools tend to be invisibly immersed in the world, in the artwork the tool's entire world becomes visible along with it.' (Harman, 2007, p110) As well as looking at the original Heidegger essay we will also analyse the response of Schapiro to Heidegger and Derrida to both Heidegger and Schapiro.

In a statement that seems to correlate with what we read by Isabella Graw, Heidegger says that we cannot separate the artist from the artwork: 'The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other... Art is the origin of both artist and work' (Heidegger, 1950, p89)

He goes on to say, in a manner that seems to foreshadow Harman's criticism of overmining and undermining, that this essence cannot be derived from higher concepts, (an artwork's essence cannot be discovered by overmining) nor can it be derived from analysing the characteristics of artworks, (it cannot be discovered by undermining either):

'And the essence of art can no more be arrived at by a derivation from higher concepts than by a collection of characteristics of actual artworks... ...selecting characteristics from among given objects, and deriving concepts from principles, are equally impossible here, and where these procedures are practiced they are a self-deception.' (Heidegger, 1950, p90)

So, for Heidegger, as it is for Harman the work of art is a special case. In fact, in Harman's summation of Heidegger's feelings on the work of art, I think we can see Harman's own view: 'While tools tend to be invisibly immersed in the world, in the artwork the tool's entire world becomes visible along with it.' (Heidegger, 1950, p110)

The thrust of the remainder of Heidegger's essay is as follows, an artwork is a setting forth of truth; it does this by first asserting its independence and then disclosing truth. Heidegger revisits the concepts of revealing and concealing that are present throughout his philosophy and have been referred to above in explaining Harman's concept of withdrawal. But rather than being classed as *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*, instead here 'world' is the concept of concealing and 'earth' of revealing. Both concepts are of equal importance, the first stage is the artist creating a viable 'world' within the artwork, one that the spectator will accept, this is its asserting of independence, then the 'world' as we know it opens up and allows us to catch a glimpse of the 'earth' behind it, this 'earth' is truth. Moreover it is also the act

of earth being revealed, this moment of revelation is truth. Truth is both the becoming and happening of, it's revelation. (Heidegger, 1950 p115)

So, for the work of art to succeed the spectator must see both something recognisable and meaningful, ('world'), but that there is also some transcendental and/or mystical truth that is apparent to, ('earth'.) (Heidegger, 1950 p116) As exemplar Heidegger chooses one of Van Gogh's paintings of shoes and describes how the essence of these peasant woman's shoes is revealed by the artwork. They have been painted in such a way so as to appeal to us, to sit well with us. But then a greater truth is revealed: Normally we don't understand a pair of shoes by looking at them but by wearing them, what Van Gogh does though is render his painting in such a way that we understand the truth of these shoes and their context. (Heidegger, 1950 p101-102) Heidegger's passage on the shoes is worth quoting in full because of its poetry,

'From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles stretches the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.' (Heidegger, 1950, p101)

But Meyer Schapiro believes this is fallacious. He says Heidegger has 'experienced too little and too much in his contact with the work.' (Schapiro, 1968, p138) He has projected his own associations onto the painting of the shoes (Schapiro, 1968, p138)

'Alas for him, the philosopher has indeed deceived himself. He has retained from his encounter with van Gogh's canvas a moving set of associations with peasants and the soil, which are not sustained by the picture itself.' (Schapiro, 1968, p138)

Schapiro's fundamental criticism with Heidegger's text is that he believes he is mistaken about to whom the shoes belong, they are actually Van Gogh's. And Van Gogh is painting a form of self-portrait (Schapiro, 1968, p140). Schapiro returns to the subject in a subsequent essay written 26 years later, here he claims;

'One misses in all this both a personal sense of the expression and of van Gogh's feelings of 'rejection' by his own parents and by his learned teachers who had to come to doubt his fitness as a Christian preacher and missionary.' (Schapiro, 1994, p149)

Schapiro like Graw and Heidegger believes that the artist is inextricably bound up in the artwork, but not the artist as creator that Graw focusses on, recognisable by their signature. Instead, Schapiro binds the biography of the artist to their artwork, and I

believe Schapiro is wrong on this. We don't miss the knowledge of Van Gogh's rejection by his parents when we look at his painting of shoes. Schapiro continues, 'These breaks are familiar to readers of van Gogh's biography and letters.' (Schapiro, 1994, p149). In other words, this 'missing' relies on knowledge of external information, is not gleaned by an experience of the work, but by reading Van Gogh's letters. The singular echo of an artwork is not found in an artist's correspondence.

But the viewer of the shoes, or critic of the painting, shouldn't be required to read Van Gogh's letters; that we should is implied by Schapiro's critique of Heidegger. Schapiro overmines the painting by including it in what we know of Van Gogh's life. Though we can't deny that the hand of the artist forms part of the content of the work, we can deny that it is biographical information that it signifies.

Jacques Derrida addressed the subject of Schapiro's disagreement with Heidegger in *The Truth in Painting*. (Though, at the time only one of Schapiro's essays had been written.) Here Derrida is excited by assumptions that both writers have made about the painting; how does the viewer know it is a 'pair' of shoes for instance? 'Heidegger and Schapiro denied themselves the slightest doubt as to the parity or pairedness of these two shoes.' (Derrida, 1987, p333)

Derrida amusingly defends Heidegger from Schapiro's accusations of projection, countering that they are both talking from their own backgrounds and beliefs instead of the painting and both therefore projecting. (Derrida, 1987, p307-314) Heidegger 'is still not speaking of the picture, even if it is a given picture in view that drives him to tighten the example around the shoes,' (Derrida, 1987, p331). But the same could be said of Derrida; we are no longer talking about the painting, but about the correspondence around it. The painting as object has again been lost. Derrida has taken the existence of the painting for granted and has concentrated on the context. He has also overmined the painting by including it in his essay, using it to make, (however valid,) points about the situated nature of Schapiro and Heidegger's knowledge. The singular echo of an artwork is not found in the essays that are written about it. Derrida offers no attempt to get to the singular echo of the painting; perhaps he too thinks that it is ineffable.

## **The Real Painting and Harman**

It would be germane at this juncture to return to Harman here and to his opinion of Heidegger's essay. He is not as complimentary as might be expected, he finds that the revelation of essence that Heidegger sees in the painting, is flawed as it a generalized essence; Heidegger finds the same essence within all art just as Graw does in all painting, rather than attending to the individual painting and its singular echo. As Harman says,

'Yet Heidegger's earth is every bit as unified as his 'being', so that every artwork ends up pointing to the same hidden earth in all cases. Whereas normal experience is adrift in a realm of presence, the Heideggerian artwork seems to punch a hole in presence and gesture vaguely towards an irreducible reality-in-itself. Yet the Heideggerian artist is left with a fountain of sensual

images in the mind (jugs, temples, peasant shoes) that all hint monotonously at the same earthy background.' (Harman, 2014, p105)

That is to say, whenever Heidegger claims that an artwork reveals depth, alludes to something deeper than that which the viewer encounters, it is always the same depth, whatever painting it is we, as viewers, may be looking at. So, Heidegger goes some way and is better, perhaps than Graw, et al. But, Harman pushes further, and this is why he is central to my thesis, he is more attentive to what I have been calling the singular echo.

The 'real' painting like any other Harmanesque object has withdrawn, and therefore cannot be paraphrased, we have seen that attempts to do so miss the singular echo of the 'real' painting. In fact, these attempts tend to lead onto one another as we shall see below.

### iii. Jose Ortega y Gasset and Metaphor

As stated in the thesis proper, this essay had a profound effect on the gestation of Harman's thought, here I work through it in detail.

On reading the essay there is an obvious synchronicity with Harman and a philosophy of autonomous objects as Ortega insists on an 'executant 'I'' within everything. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p133) Ortega affirms this 'I' by first separating lived experience from the experience of watching; the difference between having a headache and seeing someone else suffer with a headache is profound. One is a feeling of something, the other an image of something. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p133) He uses verbs and how they are conjugated to provide a template for thinking through this, so when we say 'I walk' this is thus the feeling of walking. Whereas 'he walks' is the image of it. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p132) After developing this conceptual framework for thinking through the 'I'-ness of people he then applies it to objects and particularly a box he has in front of him on his desk. The redness of the box is as real to the box as pain is to him, and is as inaccessible to him as the pain of a fellow human, the box has it's own I-ness. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p133-4).

"There is the same difference between a pain that someone tells me about and a pain that I feel as there is between the red that I see and the being red of this red leather box. Being red is for it what hurting is for me. Just as there is an I-John Doe, there is also an I-red, and I-water, and an I-star. Everything, from a point of view within itself, is an 'I.'" (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p133-4)

The difference between observing something and feeling it, further complicates things as it means that we cannot even think about the executant 'I' that it is ourselves, because by thinking of our state of mind we make an image of it. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p136)

'So we arrive at the following difficult dilemma: there is nothing we can make an object of cognition, nothing that can exist for us unless it becomes an image, a concept, an idea- unless, that is, it stops being what it is in order to become instead a shadow or outline of itself.' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p136)

Into this world of non-cognition and the unknowable Ortega posits art as a way of understanding. Art is a language that presents things to us in the act of executing themselves. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, 138-9). Ortega is careful though not to conflate the idea that art seemingly reveals the inward executing 'I' of something, with an empathetic act of looking in which we 'become' the subject of our gaze. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p139) Instead, and it is here that Harman finds fraternity, an artwork creates a new object, distinct from its qualities, more than its physicality and more than the imagination. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p137) "The unavoidable premise that art is in essence the creation of a new object, born of the previous breakup and annihilation of real objects.' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p147)

Ortega y Gasset moves onto to address the subject of metaphor and he articulates that he sees a metaphor as a microcosm of an artwork. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p140) Then after reminding us that metaphor is both process and result, he chooses to start

with the following metaphor, taken from a poem by Valencian poet Lopez Pico: 'A cypress 'is like the ghost of a dead flame.' Ortega removes the inessential from the metaphor and strips the 'like' that makes it a simile until he is left with the following; 'A cypress is a flame'. These two objects can be linked by a shared linear outline and if we concentrate on this, the appeal of the metaphor recedes as we concentrate on geometric observation. Ortega believes that there is something more than mere resemblance that interests us here, but this coincidental resemblance is important as it allows us to see them both simultaneously and we begin to notice what distinguishes them rather than unites them. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p142) To create the cypress of the metaphor, we annihilate the 'real' cypress, we replace it instead with the cypress of the metaphor, which he christens the beautiful cypress. As the metaphor makes us look at both objects we can't exclude one in favour of the other. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p143)

'The annihilation of what both objects are as practical images. When they collide with one another their hard carapaces crack and the internal matter, in a molten state, acquires the softness of plasm, ready to receive a new form and structure.' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p143)

We look through the flame at the cypress, and through the cypress at the flame, and a new object is created for us, as yet unformed. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p143) The cypress we are picturing has become fused with the flame through the acuteness of metaphor. Likewise, we have also fused with the cypress-flame in our mind and created a new object. Referring back to the difference between picturing an image and feeling. Ortega asks us what state are we in while we are thinking of this cypress? He asserts that the metaphor has forced us into the state of 'cypress', we have made it into an action, a verb, we live executantly this cypress-flame, we *cypress-flame* as verb. (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p144-145) Referring back to the difference between picturing an image, and feeling, Ortega asks us what state are we in while we are thinking of this cypress? He asserts that the metaphor has forced us into the state of 'cypress', we have made it into an action, a verb, we cypress.

'In other words, I will have to find a way to force the word 'cypress,' with its nominal value, to become active and erupt, assuming that of a verb... ...We simply sense an identity, we live executantly this being, the cypress-flame.' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914, p144-145)

## **Appendix Two**

### ***The Plant, the Wolf, the Great Aunt***

A third object text written for a house plant, not included in the collection, *Stories for Paintings*, self-published as part of this research.

#### ***The Plant, the Wolf, the Great Aunt***

This weekend we will scatter the ashes of my Great Aunt, off of Higgar Tor, a landmark gritstone tor in the Peak District. Coordinates 53.3338'N, 1.6183'W.

I will go this Saturday, August 27<sup>th</sup> 2016, with my father and my sister.

Great Aunt makes me sound posh but she was simply my Grandmother's sister.

She used to say it made her sound older than she was, I remember her saying that to the parents of one of my school friends as she collected my sister and I from school one Tuesday evening in the 1980's.

We'd then go to her house and play 'ball,' a game of our own invention, or Halma invented in 1883 or 1884 by George Howard Monks. The pieces came in a box with an odd design on the front, with four coloured cone shaped pieces hovering like spectres of angels beneath the silhouette of a tree on a Prussian Blue night.

My great aunt is intrinsically linked to my life as my oldest memory, from almost 33 years ago, from the 29<sup>th</sup> October 1983, is of the day when my sister was born and I woke up, headed for my parents room, but was called into the other bedroom where my great aunt had been sleeping, arriving as my parents headed to the hospital at some point whilst I was sleeping.

One trivial thing I remember about her is that it was she who explained to me that Araucaria is the Latin word for the monkey puzzle tree and this is why it was chosen by the famous setter of crosswords the Reverend John Galbraith Graham MBE. He who famously announced his own terminal cancer through clues and their answers in a crossword printed in the Guardian on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2013, Guardian cryptic No. 25, 842.

The Araucaria tree appears in the well-polished stairways of the introductory passages of *Steppenwolf*, under the contemplation of Harry Haller. I have read this introduction many times but not far beyond it.

I am trying to read the book again, having re-bought it this year. I think one of the reasons I have previously struggled is because of the jolt of switching narrative perspectives. Going from the eyes of the bourgeois nephew of the landlady to the eyes of Harry Haller.



I also think every time I read it I hope that Steppenwolf will be my age as I feel so sure I am going to find in him my image, every time then I am disappointed when he begins by complaining about being elderly.

At some point though Haller and I will be contemporaries I hope, and I will be older than him, while he agelessly watches plants fidget in varnished atriums.

My first girlfriend C read Steppenwolf and loved it, I think I might have given her my previous copy when we split up. I remember her being surprised when I said I liked walking down the middle of streets as that is something in the book apparently. When she said this is just confirmed my suspicions that I would find myself within it.

I bought it again in the winter, after the end of my second relationship, when I felt even more wolf-like than normal, slipping between the mists of winter, drunken and teary-eyed and desperate, trudging down the middle of the coastally named roads of Brockley;

Fossil, Shell, Cliffview, Sandrock, Overcliff, Undercliff

Houseplants always make me want to read Steppenwolf.

My first girlfriend lost her mother to cancer last month.

She told me in a message I received at 12:58 on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2016.

I cried as I formulated a response, stood outside a bank in Stratford.

I think I remember that David Shields favoured the introduction to Steppenwolf, maybe I've made this up, it fits with a narrative I have of him around the time he published Reality Hunger, maybe it was in an article in response written by Zadie Smith, her defence of the novel that I see now was published on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2009.

Almost exactly a year before this, on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 2008 the New York Review of Books published an article by Smith in which she outlines two paths for the novel, comparing Netherland by Joseph O Neill to Remainder by Tom McCarthy.

She was worried by the lyrical Realism of Netherland, preferring the emptied-out interiority of the protagonist in Remainder, obsessing about events with his life.

Netherland does grate sometimes as does the press that surrounds it,

'Why is he wearing his cricket whites?'

My friend George wrote, sending me a link to an interview conducted in O'Neill's provisional home in the Chelsea Hotel and published in the Guardian on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2008,

Which sort of sums up a financial otherworldliness that the protagonist inhabits. However unabashed he may be about it. It is still there.

But there are two passages in the book that stay with me. When the narrator reflects on his last visit to his mother before her death. Going up to the window he had stared out of as a child, watching the north sea, the silent house surrounding him,

The second scene I remember is his wife explaining to a marriage counsellor why she wants to stay together. As a responsibility to see each other through almost. I had thought the same thing had applied with C. It hadn't.

Maybe I am reading Steppenwolf again now as I find myself falling in love for the third time and am allowing myself to daydream of a life away from the Steppes.

My dad has told me that Higgar Tor is where he wants his own ashes scattered, something I will resolutely try to avoid thinking about on Saturday as the fractions of another life are whipped from us and into the landscape.

Another ending, no more numbers, no more counting.

## **Appendix 3**

Documentation of paintings made and exhibitions organised  
as part of the study

### **CONTENTS**

Pages ii – iii	Image details for the paintings from the series APATSS made as part of the doctoral research
Pages iv – xvi	Reproduction of paintings from the series APATSS made as part of the doctoral research
Page xvii	Image details for paintings made in Catalunya 2017
Pages xviii – xxiii	Reproduction of paintings made in Catalunya 2017
Page xxiv	Image details for the organised exhibitions
Pages xxv – xxviii	Installation views of the organised exhibitions

**APATSS\***

**\*All Paintings Are The Same Size**

30 x 25 cm or 25 x 30 cm

Page iv

Top row left – right

**Memories of Trendy Paul**

*Oil on canvas*

**The Riposo**

*Oil on canvas*

**System**

*Mixed media on canvas*

Middle row l – r

**Portrait**

*Oil on canvas*

**Casa**

*Oil on canvas*

**Joaquim**

*Oil on canvas*

Bottom row l – r

**Piero**

*Oil on canvas*

**Giovanni**

*Oil on canvas*

**Grotesque**

*Oil on canvas*

Page v

**Evening Class**

*Oil and acrylic on canvas*

Page vi

**Madrid**

*Oil on paper and linen*

Page vii

Top row l – r

**Hh**

*Oil on canvas*

**Cave at Day**

*Oil on canvas*

**Frank R**

*Oil on canvas*

Middle row l – r

**Bachelor**

*Oil and acrylic on canvas*

**The Names**

*Oil on canvas*

**Marcel & Stephane**

*Oil on canvas*

Bottom row l – r

**Pupae**

*Oil and acrylic on board*

**Cave**

*Oil on canvas on canvas board*

**Before we were Born**

*Oil on canvas*

Page viii

**Crash**

*Oil on canvas*

Page ix

Top row l – r

**Metamorphoses**

*Oil on canvas*

**Calculus**

*Acrylic and household paint on canvas*

**An English Volcano**

*Oil on canvas*

Middle row l – r

**Bad Timing**

*Mix media on canvas*

**Redhead**

*Oil on canvas*

**Now, Now and Now**

*Oil and acrylic on canvas*

Bottom row l – r

**Venice**

*Oil on aluminium*

**Geologist**

*Oil and acrylic on board*

**Portuguese Atlas**

*Acrylic on board*

Page x

Top row l – r

**Paul**

*Oil on canvas*

**Lorenzo**

*Oil on canvas*

**Luis**

*Oil on canvas*

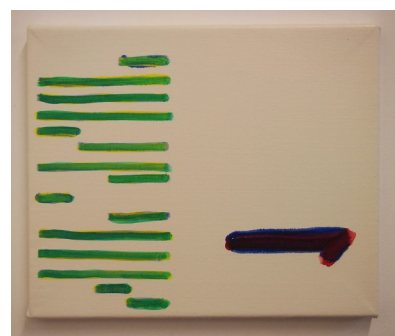
<u>Middle row l – r</u>	Page xiii	Page xv
<b>Coverack</b>	<u>Top row l – r</u>	<u>Top row l – r</u>
<i>Oil on canvas board</i>	<b>Wave</b>	<b>Cave at Night</b>
<b>Washing Day</b>	<i>T-shirt on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>
<i>Acrylic on canvas</i>	<b>Landgrab</b>	<b>Felipa</b>
	<i>Oil and household paint on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on paper on canvas</i>
<b>Morag</b>	<b>Learning Catalan</b>	<b>Drawing Asturias</b>
<i>Spray paint on socks</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on board</i>
<u>Bottom row l – r</u>	<u>Middle row l – r</u>	<u>Middle row l – r</u>
<b>Gate</b>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Future Disasters</b>
<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>
<b>Lump</b>	<b>My Werewolf Girlfriend</b>	<b>Halma</b>
<i>Oil and acrylic on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on board</i>
<b>Rebel</b>	<b>Casa</b>	<b>Marbs</b>
<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil and felt-tip on board</i>
	<u>Bottom row l – r</u>	<u>Bottom row l – r</u>
Page xi	<b>Andrea</b>	<b>George in the Prado</b>
<b>CRG</b>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>
<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<b>Flower Paul</b>	<b>Head of Medusa</b>
	<i>Oil on acrylic on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>
Page xii	<b>Tiziano</b>	<b>Lewisham</b>
<b>Mask</b>	<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil and acrylic on canvas</i>
<i>Oil on canvas</i>		
	Page xiv	Page xvi
	<b>Helen</b>	<b>Double Leo</b>
	<i>Oil on canvas</i>	<i>Oil on paper on canvas</i>



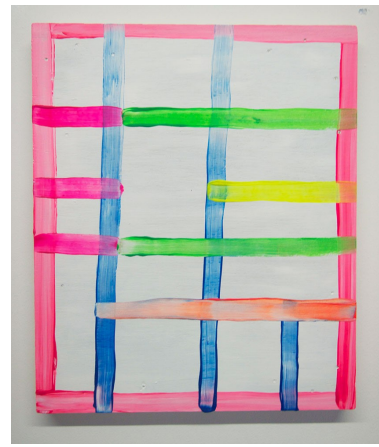








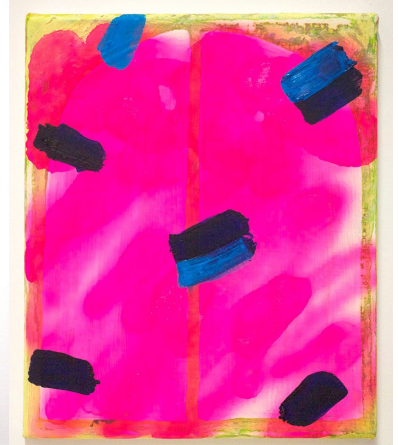




















Paintings made in Catalunya 2017

All paintings 61 x 50 cm and oil on canvas

Page xviii

***Meatspace***

Page xix

Top row l – r

***Daedalus***

***Icarus***

Bottom row l – r

***Swarm***

***Pluckin' the bird***

Page xx

Top row l – r

***Chatarreros***

***The Slippery Heart of  
the Seaweed***

Bottom row l – r

***King of Birds***

***Direcció Muntanya***

Page xxi

***Tetramorph***

Page xxii

***Vanfire of the Bonities***

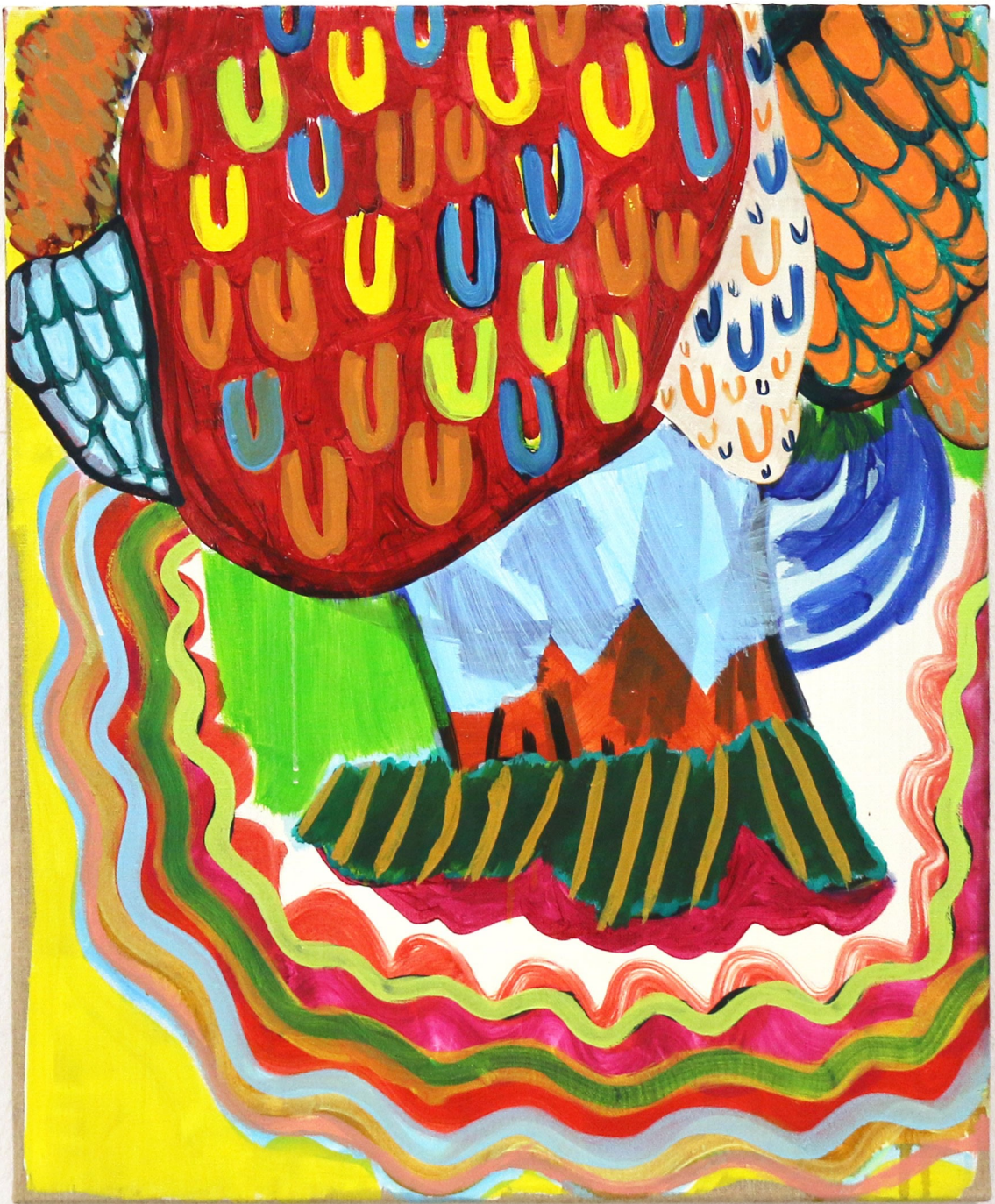
Page xxiii

***Daphne & Sebastian***















## **Exhibitions**

I exhibited regularly throughout my study but only organised two exhibitions specific to my research.

Pages xxv & xxvi show

***AS I TOOK HER ARMS SHE  
STARED THROUGH MY FACE AT  
THE DARK BRANCHES OF THE  
TREES OVER MY HEAD***

Yellow, Varese, Italy

Christiane Bergelt, Olarn Chiaravanont,  
Michael Lawton, Rasmus Nilausen, Catherine Parsonage, Ross Taylor

curated by Michael Lawton

28.01 – 04.03.2018

Pages xxvii & xxviii show

***Cap Gros***

38b Projects, London

20.07 – 22.07.2018









## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

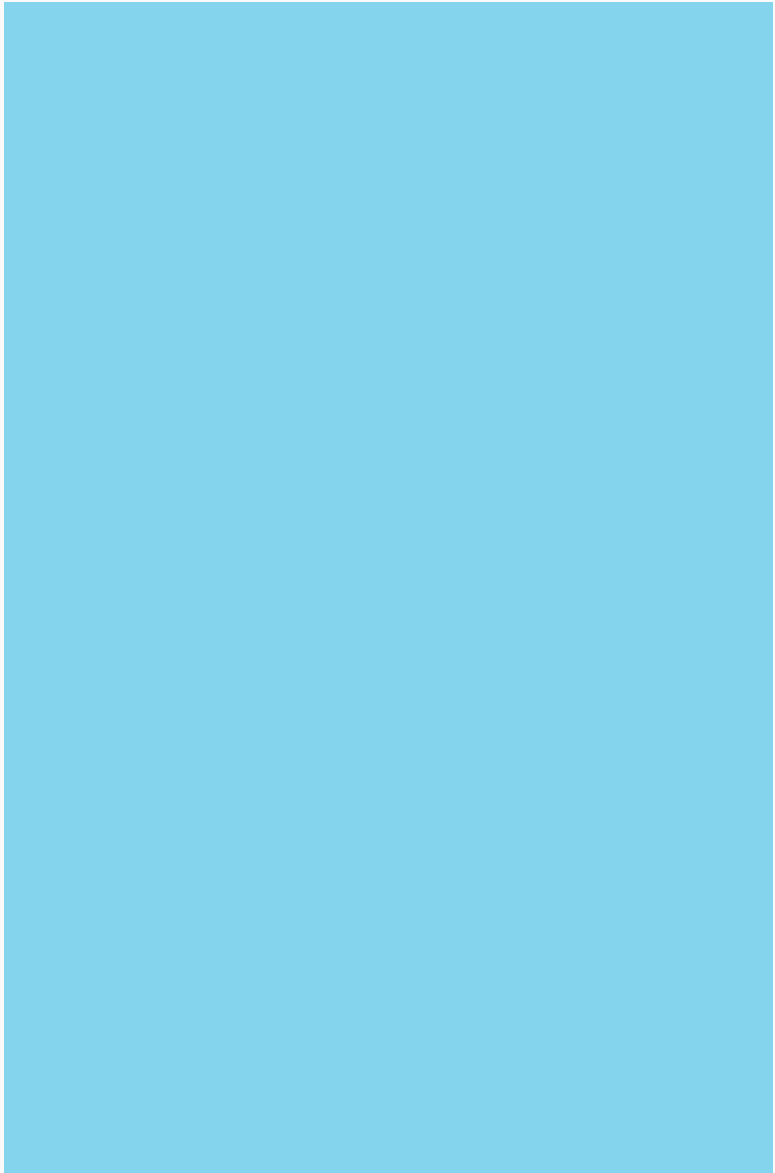
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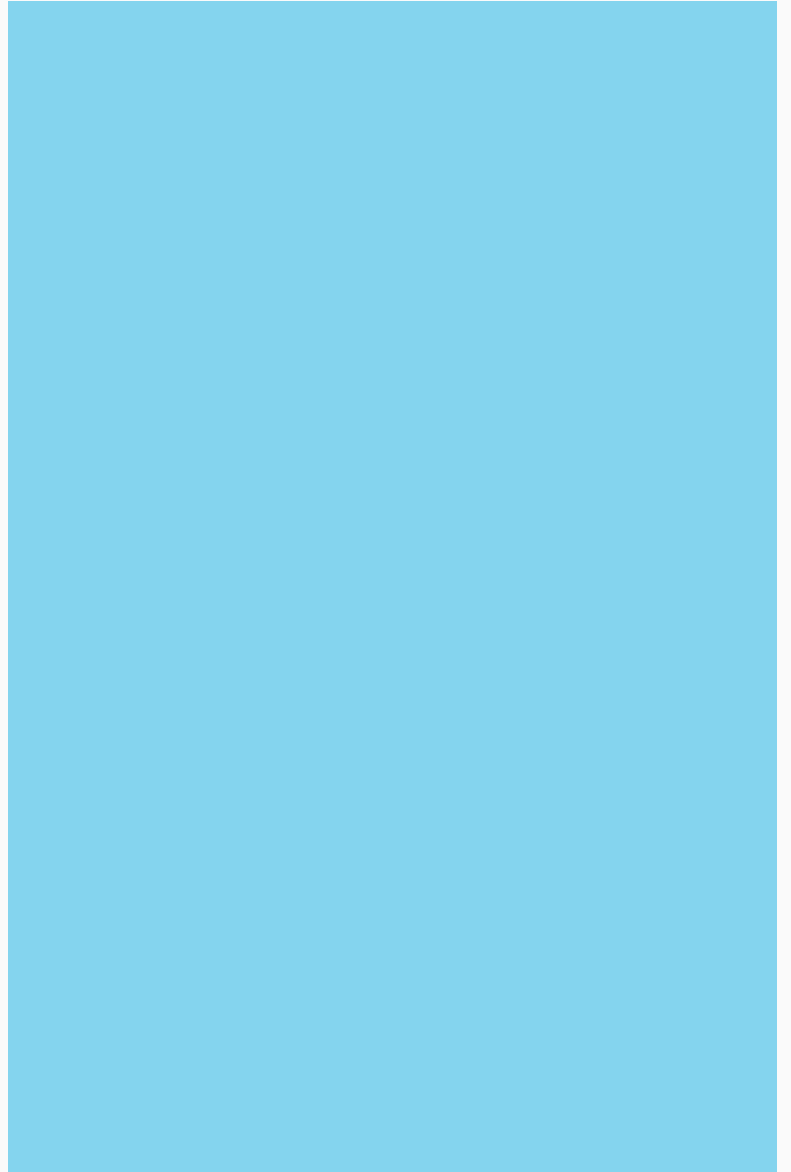


Michael  
Lawton

Stories  
for Paintings

Stories  
for Paintings

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Lawton





STORIES  
FOR PAINTINGS

Michael Lawton



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Postface



## He Collects Writing

He collects writing, or, to be precise, he collects the hand-written.

He is a little embarrassed by the passion he has for it, embarrassed that whenever he finds it, be it lying in the street, snaffled into a hedgerow or resting atop a bin he will grab it. Compulsively smoothing out its creases or patting it dry as he walks briskly away from where he found it. Sometimes he buys it, from shops or auctions, and he has on occasion stolen it.

His wife Jade indulges him in his passion, she finds it sweet she says, though she repeatedly asks him why he does it. This is one of the mental-images he has stored of her, one he can conjure up and hold clearly in his mind, her head cocked as she asks these semi-rhetorical questions, squinting slightly, as if into the sun and her mouth wearing the half smile of the teaser: “But why Alexander? Where does this love come from? Do you love your writing more than me?”

He doesn't bother with the last question, which he knows was asked just to wind him up. He can half-answer the first question but has no idea the answer to the second, where does anyone's passion come

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

from? He thinks it probably comes from his childhood, he knows that people's attachments often do, but his childhood is not something he thinks about anymore. The 'why' is due partly to its rarity these days, when the world is a place experienced as information charges on all kinds of screens. In this environment it has to mean something doesn't it? But the main reason for him collecting it is because it is a matchstick to his imagination: He finds worlds in the words and in the space between them, whole worlds, that he likes to explore. So, this is what he does with the writing he gets, he looks at it. Looks at it for a long time and tries to construct the lives of those who had might have written it, and explores these lives.

Recently he has been lucky in his search and has added three items to his collection, all acquired within a month of one another.

The first find was at the start of the month whilst staying in a hotel on a business trip, organised by the firm for whom he worked, to build an 'esprit de corps' between their employees, all of whom worked by themselves, scattered around the globe and sat behind automated systems. The company was worried where such isolation might lead and so it was hoped that these quarterly get-togethers might engender a sense of company spirit that would pre-empt any problems.

It was on one of these sojourns that in his room he had found written on the thick hotel notepaper in resolute block capitals:

## HE COLLECTS WRITING

IN THE YEAR 2050 THE WORLD  
POPULATION IS GOING TO BE 3.5 BILLION.  
ALL THE PEOPLE ARE GOING TO BE IN  
FAMILIES. IF THERE IS THE RESOURCES  
IT IS GOING TO BE DECIDED BY FAMILY  
HEADS. WHICH PROCESS IS GOING TO BE  
MONITORED BY PROPER GOVERNMENT!

The exclamation mark at the end was massive, straddling both the white of the notepaper and the tasteful insignia of the hotel below it. When he found it, he ripped it carefully from the pad, worrying the gum as he did so. The text was written so stridently that the capitals were pursed into the next sheet and he ran his fingers over these scars as he read the sheet again, he toyed with the idea of taking this marked sheet as well but decided against it, grinning at the thought of what Jade might say. Returning to the note he puzzled over who might have written it.

He wasn't sure if it had been written by hotel staff or a previous guest. From what he knew about writing, (and because of his collection and passion he knew more than most, had taken more than one online course in graphology,) he thought it must be a man's, thus ruling out the chambermaid. And the rooms were expensive he thought, and he therefore expected all the guests to be educated enough to know that the world's population was already scraping 9 billion and 2050 was only ten years away. Could it be another guest invited and paid for by their employers?

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

There was something about the way the letters joined, or rather didn't, that made him think that the writer's first language wasn't English, which was how the writer had chosen to express himself here and he knew this was the case for plenty of his colleagues.

But then Alexander read it again and realised that it could be read as predicting disaster; that 5 billion were to be wiped out. There was something urgent and unbidden about the angle of the capitals. It looked as if it had been written in controlled frenzy, as if communicated to a writer in a reverie. Had the writer received a prophecy?

In fact it looked like the spiritualist artefacts he'd seen in auctions, the hand-written of séances 150 years ago: the writer simply a vessel for a visiting spirit. Alexander had actually bought a piece from an auction that might have been the writing of Arthur Conan Doyle; a tense auction and he had only just beaten the bid of a Chinese collector. It was rare to be bidding against a non-European, he had thought, and decided that this was because people wanted writing they can read easily, but in this instance Doyle's name had added a glamour to the lot that replaced intelligibility.

Likewise, autographs were enjoying a perhaps surprising renaissance in the middle of the twenty first century. The uniformity of digitisation had inspired a cult of the individual and autographs seemed to encapsulate a sort of individuality. But autographs were of no interest to Alexander, he liked the transience of his imaginings, not the signature of a notable whose life he could actually read about should he wish,



## HE COLLECTS WRITING

and he liked writing with little significance behind it, something humbler than an autograph.

This made collecting easier as it was now only the ephemeral that people wrote by hand, and the more fascinating for it to him. A shopping list that had been used as a bookmark, would lead to an evening reconstructing someone's life from the food they bought.

In his twenties he had thought briefly that this pleasure in words might be the spur to a career as a writer. He had imagined that career thoroughly and had also tried writing his own things, indulging his imagination this way, but he never had the time and found it hard to suspend his disbelief long enough. He always knew that he was writing the words, was constructing the narratives, so he couldn't lose himself in the words he was creating. This was dissatisfying, and he wasn't sure what he hoped ultimately to gain from it. He did still jot down the conclusions he made from some of the fragments he had found, so as not to forget the particular interpretation he was within and as encouragement for further imaginings.

His second find of the month was discovered out for dinner with his wife. They had gone to a restaurant near their home on the harbour. It had been fitted out to look like the inside of a galleon. Books had been used to line the shelves of the artificially crooked cabin to add authenticity. Books were easy to come by these days and were put to multiple uses; he knew of some eco-houses that had their cavity walls stacked with

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

series of them as a form of insulation.

While his wife was at the bathroom Alexander took these books down and flicked through them, he had found the handwritten here before. Crib notes or reminders, touching and mawkish dedications. He had often torn out pages that had particularly interesting jottings in the margins. In his study he had a framed page 157 of *The Deer Park* on which someone had written SHUT UP. He had over a hundred pages torn from different bibles in different hotel rooms, arranged by page number in his collection.

But this discovery was not actually a published book but a leather-bound exercise book that must have looked the part to the designer or restaurateur. It was actually the journal of a young seminarian. From his rudimentary knowledge of graphology he had thought that this was probably the writing of a psychopath, there was an 'ideological motivation' in the slant. He had spent some grisly evenings imagining the crimes committed on his unsuspecting flock. A page entitled 'Preparing Parishioners For A Pastoral Visit' had been particularly fertile.

It was at home that he did his daydreaming, after work, usually sitting on the balcony, his legs up on the railings. He lived near his place of work, the port, where he guided the containers in, across plains of other containers, a multi-coloured geometry spread out beneath him like an Anni Albers tapestry. It was a process that was now almost entirely automated, so while he was in the office most of his time was spent looking through filing cabinets of files that were

supposed to have been destroyed when their systems were computerised. But Alexander had kept them, and spent his time flicking through the handwritten records of his predecessors, imagining the climatic conditions that caused what was described.

Their home was about a mile down the harbour, a flat in a converted warehouse, itself converted from a ship builder's yard. An idiosyncratic building, it sat between the debris around the edge of the port and the curl of a slip road that the container lorries funnelled down. The warehouse was a square built around an internal space that was used once upon a time for building ships. The huge arched doorways that once allowed the first dry scraping passage of boats now homed a couple of towering palm trees, greasy with the industrial coagulum blown off the harbour and soon to cower under the restrictions of the doorway.

They had moved there once their son had left home, deciding on one of the better flats for its views. It stretched the length of the building, its front windows looking out onto the water and the rear onto the internal space that was now a bowl of grass with picnic benches in its centre. Petrified keels and keelson had been dug into the grass by the developers and stood above the benches like formalist sculpture.

In their flat he had a photograph of their warehouse taken from the sea 100 years ago, just after the road had been built. You could see the windows of their flat as the light bounced off them in the texture of the old print. It looked odd, incongruous with the D of the slip-road next to it, as if two photographs had been

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

artfully collaged together.

He was always very private, his type of upbringing breeds in oneself solitariness, but his wife was too, and so they fitted well together. She was the only woman he has ever really known. Though her parents did their best to provide affection for him, an affection they must have realised he'd grown up without; they saw in him a wariness, the wariness of a wild animal, that meant they were never close.

At night he and his wife watched from their window as the flares of the off-shore industry fizzled beautifully. He agreed with Jade, "that just because it is man-made doesn't mean it isn't awe-inspiring", though he also recognises why others might prefer something more natural and authentic, after all that might be why he collected writing, somehow both natural and man-made.

Sometimes his focussed daydreaming made him wistful or sad and he wondered if he was imagining places and people he'd rather be, but he didn't think so. He loved his wife and he loved his son and he knew that you could only live one life.

The third acquisition was found in a charity shop. Ten years ago, most of his collection had been groomed from visits to these types of shops but they had dried up in recent years, though that didn't stop him going looking for them and his last visit was rewarding. He'd found the drafts of two letters from an old woman, Winifred Lees, to her great-grandchildren Nicholas and Caroline. It had been tucked instead a dirty leatherette

## HE COLLECTS WRITING

wallet that had probably been a salmon colour when new. The children had been recently adopted and Winifred was hoping the new foster parents would allow her to maintain a written relationship with the children. Alexander imagines that this was allowed and happened, careful to make Caroline and Nicholas' childhood a happier experience than his own. To begin with he didn't know for sure that these were drafts of letters but he preferred to think so, he wanted to think that Winifred's letters had been written up and delivered.

He was thinking about them while walking home from work. There was a bus he could take, but he preferred to walk, it wasn't long and it took him through the yellows, greens and blues of the lights and flares of the harbour. Looking at them makes him feel like he is living in the future. He was the only person he knew who smoked, though he didn't know many people and he had a cigar on the way to work and one on his way home.

As he smoked he realised that he would've been in an orphanage at a similar time to Caroline and Nicholas. He had kept only one photograph taken of him at the home, wearing a red jumper with a blue A on the chest, and he thought he could remember what he was thinking at the time it was taken. He was wondering where his sister was.

It was raining when he got in and he went out onto the balcony, and sat under the covered part and re-read the letters of Winifred Lees and imagined Nicholas

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

and Caroline in their home, looking out onto the wet lawn in front of the building, he couldn't picture them without picturing himself looking onto a wet lawn, small and in a red jumper, looking out for his sister.

## Morta Della

When Arabella Carter was very young she was already the best in the town at naming things.

**Shilick** she said, four years old and pointing at the damp grass that seemed always damp, drooping like towel-dried hair toward the cracks in the pavement, and soon everyone in our constituency was calling it Shilick Grass.

She was twenty-one when she named the blue-black birds that feed on the Shilick, **Torozens**. It was actually from their habit of eating facing the horizon, she told me one day in my studio, that she drew the inspiration for their name. But to those who didn't know, there was simply some Torozen-ness about these birds and their patient stance, some Torozen-ness about the Torozens that we were now all aware of.

She called the fall you have as you are dropping off to sleep, the **Thistimble**.

She called the moment of being frozen with fear when

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

you wake from a nightmare **Garllantheon**.

She called the sensation on the tongue as it sucks back between the pebbles, **Shishingle**.

It was impossible not to see our constituency, our world, through her words, from the **Bartomollotas** grazing in our fields to the **Palmillo** tree, the fruits of which, the **Palmilla**, we eat every summer.

Chips of paint she called **Tecks**.

The unsure footing of shoes on artificial turf she called **Fwooth**.

The tearing of one's jealous heart she called **Wriwrac**.

She named all our colours. When I travelled, I realised that we don't all think colours the same way; the painter might think in terms of weight, the cook might give colours flavours, the iconoclast, fury, but in our town we had all learnt to think of colours as Arabella did. **Diozomi** was the blue of the evening sky in April, **Pulmaca** the purple of Bartomollota shit. The colour of the blood of the trees she called **Dinzengent**, and then we would call anything else of that tawny red Dinzengent, and we also used it as an adjective to describe fertility and harvest time. Her words were fuzzed sometimes through our usage but they still had their roots in her.



## MORTA DELLA

The ink stains she got on her fingers after writing she called **Falruises** and all of us called the ink stains we got on our fingers after writing Falruises.

The sucking wince she made when her mother applied iodine to her scraped knees she called **Cha** and then all of us called the sucking wince we made when our mothers applied iodine to our scraped knees Cha.

The mild flashbacks to hallucinations that were neither blissful nor terrifying, she called **Polzetos** and all of us called the mild flashbacks to hallucinations that were neither blissful nor terrifying, Polzetos.

This skill of appositeness of description, this appropriateness of her word skills, resulted in many of her neighbours, my fellow constituents and countrymen, applying to her for advice on other matters. At first she'd respond, flattered and demure; demurring 'I am a poet not a doctor' or 'I am a poet not a sorceress.' And it is true that back then she was more reticent about naming for others, about giving out advice, about settling disputes, about rebranding the rundown.

"What of the old names?" she said, "what will become of them?"

There was some truth in this. Some of the creatures lost their edges after being embraced by her vocabulary, lost that which wasn't captured by her names: The

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

feathers of the *Kooxans* lost their eyes, or these eyes lost the ability of sight anyway, became nothing more than glassy lolling spheres; delicious when fried, crispy on the outside, runny inside. After all it was also true that the Kooxans were a lot easier to catch once their panoptic vision had gone.

Sometimes she would suggest names for children of kin; she told me what I would name my daughter, and I did, but she went no further than that in her advice.

We all see the world through our own eyes. But I remember thinking that for her it must have been different. The world, our constituency, came to meet her eyes, it must have felt to her that the world almost wanted to be seen the way she saw it. Unlike me she never left, and her words became embedded in everything, little by little she tinted all her surroundings until her world was as she wished it.

I don't know if this is why but at some point, she changed her mind on offering advice, on getting involved in the lives of others, perhaps she wanted their worlds to look more like hers. At this point I was travelling outside the city at the end of my youth, on national service, but before I left, word of her ability was spreading beyond our constituency. This would have been the end of her youth too. When I returned not only was she dispensing advice more readily, she had also made some powerful friends.

## MORTA DELLA

I can't really dink or complain; I took her offer too, when she was in my studio that day she bought a painting I'd made of the moon. She told me I should only make paintings of the moon, and I did, and made my name as an artist.

She came to know a businessman TH Lavinder and with her help, naming each of his franchises differently, he became very rich. He seemed to have amassed his fortune whilst I was away. Before I left there was a park that was renamed **Lavindery**, because of the lavender that grew there, or so Arabella said. In my absence Lavinder had taken ownership of it, it was in his name after all, and he levelled the park and built flats, expanding into property.

When TH Lavinder decided he wanted to run for mayor of our constituency, our world, Arabella was involved in his electioneering; everyone said that her provision of a name – **Remuner & Renumer** – to his particular, radical wealth redistribution solution for austerity, was the reason for its popularity.

During his candidacy she helped expose the nepotism that the incumbent mayor profited from by naming it **Chachality**. Until it was named we weren't able to see how septic, rife and damaging it was, both to democracy and to the way we were perceived outside of our country. As the bodies of the now former mayor and his deputy were left in a tank in the main square she called the process of their putrefaction **Sanstein**.

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

The aqueduct that marked the beginning of Lavinder's ambitions for expansion, she called **Forevet**. The water that flooded the fields after the rains, diverted there by Forevet, she called **Tillender**. Dinzengent was buxful because of Tillender for a whole vicade and the city got wealthier and wealthier. Soon more and more of her words had entered our vocabulary. Was she speaking for Lavinder or was Lavinder speaking for her? When he came onto the delepatheron and said Asturton! Asturton Piatges! We weren't really that surprised. When we went to war she called the machines our soldiers rode off in **Coupaers**, and she blessed them.

She called the blood of our enemies, **Dismalaplay**.

The children of our enemies, **Jattle**.

The name of their land, **Dogerer**.

# The Organism

There were tall potted plants lining the limits of the hangar.

I ran my fingers through their fronds whenever I passed, wondering, as always, who had decided to put them there and in my mind congratulating them on their decision.

Every time I did this I lifted the residue of chalk that rested on the waxy leaves. I wasn't sure where the chalk came from, but I would watch it tickle as it entered into the lights we were making and disappear as it travelled into fissures in the atmosphere.

Touching one another so as not to lose our rhythm we turned, rolled apart, still in contact, stayed in touch, pushed back, pulled forth. A routine we'd learnt from birth, a role we were born into. We then reconnected, plugged in, delivered our charge, moved on, moved upwards, pulled back, pushed forth.

It was compulsory work, life in the organism demanded

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

it. The life of the organism depended on it. We took it in turns, worked to a rota, conscription, community.

Touching one another so as not to lose our focus we ascended. A line of lights appeared on the horizon, and we released them into the future. Up there they glided, blissful, sated, happy, satisfied. The organism was replete, and we were ready to work again. Catch and release, Catch and hold.

We dove our hands into the flare furnace. The brickwork was orange in that light, the purple went lilac in the light we'd created, held steadfastly, resisted, resisted, resisted, turned.

Descending again, our shoulders touching their shoulders; it was cold inside the organism, so we kept close together. We were a society that looked after one another. A hand on a shoulder, a belly cradled, passage eased, promises kept. Burst forth, set to.

A body, a multiple, working like a rumour, a generation of questioning from the ardour of the system. Affect and pre-violence, particles moving constantly, affects moving in space.

We kept working, our hands bathed in light, our fingers knitted together. Throbbing between the organism and them, the organism and the light, the light and them. The bulbs of our knuckles shuddered as the pulse passed along them. We all felt as though they must swell

## THE ORGANISM

with the energy that they were creating, but we knew that this was a trick of the mind. Enclose, include.

We passed the light to the others. The others passed the light to them. They paused, they stepped, the organism bowed, the organism ushered them forward. Circle, encircle, occlude and circlude.

It was cold inside the organism, but we worked without gloves so that we could properly feel the light, trace its contours to meld it and mold it. The light breathed warmth back into our fingertips, whispered charges into the knuckles but without the light our hands ached and throbbed, and we sensed one another's pain in hands empurpled and moaning.

Carrying our light we crossed the hangar, the sky vast in front of us, the stars carrying their own light met our gaze. We looked at what we had made, basked in the light we had created. Held, like a raindrop, then released into the future. We looked at one another, eyes fizzed with the afterglow, we saw stars in front of the stars.

We waited and watched the others release their light. They drifted back down. We were shadowed by snatches of their conversation. We drifted back down. Over our shoulders we could hear other conversations but couldn't look around to see what was being said, to see who was saying what.

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

Back in our quarters we stripped off, remembering the way the light had felt under our fingers we touched one another, skin tingling, warmed up, touched.



# The Battle of San Romano

## **Pierre**

He was smoking his last cigarette.

The light was almost like that other 11th August, the day of the eclipse, ethereal and extra-terrestrial.

There was a castle on the hill and a buzzard was gliding through the wordless sky with a snake hanging from its beak. In the distance blots of shrubbery peppered the fields, growing slowly, steadily, reluctant to expend too much energy under the blast of the sun.

He would look directly at the sun then turn back to the hedgerow and see spots and circles in front of his eyes. Under the nearest hedge he could see what he thought was a turtle, but it might also have been a rock.

To his left were the collapsed parasols of an orangeade company, leaning against the back of the white stone building; another set of parasols were up

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

and already protecting the four white tables further away from him. At one were sitting a couple, the man hidden from view by an umbrella, the woman with her shoulders and neck rolled back so that they caught the first of the day's sun.

She was probably going to spend the rest of the day working in the hotel, Pierre thought.

At another table, a man in a powder-blue suit talked on a phone. Otherwise it was almost noiseless there, the gravel under his feet audible as he fought the need to piss.

His own shirt was spotted with black dots and there were gaps of light in the hedge winking in front of him like stars in the firmament.

The sky was cropped like he'd been early-evening drinking, like a migraine descending. His mother disappeared on the day of that solar eclipse.

The thought of which made him think he would phone his brother Serge. Pierre would speak to him and he would speak to Gustav. Serge was in between them in age; the Venn diagram at which point the other two overlapped, the darkness of Gustav, the dreaminess of Pierre, but both given to let their minds wander, to follow thoughts to their vanishing point.

**Gustav**

Pierre's brother lived underground, his Paris basement flat extending like a conference hall. Rural in atmosphere, like dark pastoral tales, like the struggle of peasanthood.

Flags hung from the ceiling above the bed, a bed they shared when Pierre visited; hung there to cover the damp patches, but also to inspire. There was one wall that was papered to look like a log cabin.

Gustav had the melancholy face of a horse, wildly disappointed in any idea that was presented to him. He was an expert in international gothic.

Whenever Pierre visited they drank stout then went on silent walks around Barbés and Gustav blew kisses to the North African men who bounced around the market on Boulevard La Chapelle. Hidden faces turned down to avoid eye contact.

Gustav looked creased, tired, older than he was, though he was the eldest of the three, rolled up, travelled, evening falling through his features.

The tired, creased bed linen was also turned down. There was an old-fashioned alarm clock. Bunting, royal blue, royal white, royal red was stuffed into a plastic box under the bed.

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

Pierre didn't know what had been there when Gustav had moved in, and what had been added to inspire him, as he wrote his thesis. He didn't want to know.

There was gauze over the windows in the kitchen that gave what little light there was a doleful quality, as if in mourning for its unfiltered past.

The damp on the walls shimmered at night, the blue-black of a panther.

The colours of the pageantry were a lot warmer in the sun.

The flat only got the light in the morning, revealing the embellishments of the regalia his brother had pinned up.

In the morning Pierre would see details he'd previously missed, sunlight snuggling into crevices of colour, nestling between dirt and oil, between centuries of political, wilful disregard.

This brought an air of the carnival to the room, despite itself.

The sun brought out the woodiness of everything: hard wood, soft wood, light wood, dark wood, good wood, fake wood.

There was a smear of dark green in the top left-hand

## THE BATTLE OF SAN ROMANO

corner of the room above the wardrobe. Clothing perhaps, furred with mould.

Gustav had a cat called Mask; he said when she died he would shave off his eyebrows, as the pharaohs had done.

### Serge

Serge lived for the sea.

Pierre went to see him, his other brother, in summer.

The memory of seeing Gustav in the winter had marked him, the dark and damp, the upturned collars.

Recently restored by a session in rehab Serge had the zealotry of the convert; he welcomed Pierre with a yodelled “I’m off the drugs!” With the excitement and lack of shame of a man who had been through therapy.

Though he still drank, his eyes hooded and unfathomable afterwards; clouded by thoughts Pierre thought they shared but couldn’t be sure.

If you spend a lot of time in the sea, you spend a lot of time looking skyward. This maybe explained the number of things that Serge left all over the floor of his flat, that Pierre would absentmindedly brush to the side with his feet.

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

The two brothers went to a party; it was busy but felt different, the revellers more restrained, an old-fashioned party perhaps. Decorated by hand with streamers cut from recycled paper.

There was a punchbowl and figurines and table decorations that seemed slightly cryptic; traditions not shared with other countries.

It was a warm room, full of bare skin, and he started thinking priapically.

Surveying the scene, Pierre was trying to decide if he would drink. He was trying to stop drinking for a while, but it was hard with Serge, and he wanted to go wherever Serge went whilst he visited, mentally as well.

“Ready for a drink?”

He wobbled his head in answer, in an ‘almost’ way, in a ‘why not’ way, in a ‘let’s try to find the evening interesting’ way.

On the top of the bookshelves was a fruit bowl, he guessed, usurped from its usual position in the centre of the dining table by the punchbowl, and he could see the hemispheres of three oranges, still on the vine.

Later in the evening, tired, he watched as Serge had a long conversation with a man wearing an elaborately

## THE BATTLE OF SAN ROMANO

patterned piece of knitwear. Is he not too hot? Pierre thought.

He could still feel the warmth on his skin, still catching at the militaristic 'V's in his shirtsleeves and the tickle of sweat in the small of his back.

The man was talking about astronomy or astrology, or both; about the positions of the stars.

He wanted another drink, but there was a crush around the drinks table, so he decided to wait.

He looked instead at a reproduction of a painting hung opposite him: it showed an old market stall, the fish and game it was selling were hung at the top so as to invert the world almost; with the creatures of the land and the sea positioned in the sky. There were no birds in the picture.

A woman walked across his gaze and started chatting to him.

“You’re Pierre aren’t you, Serge’s younger brother?  
The one that lives in London.”

“Yes, that’s right; we’ve all ended up living in different countries.”

## Shifting

*This book is intended for all those who feel in need of some orientation in a strange and fascinating field. It may serve to show newcomers the lie of the land without confusing them with details; to enable them to bring some order to the wealth of names, periods, styles and traditions which crowd the pages of more ambitious works, and so equip them for consulting more specialised books in the future.*

It rained the day we moved here and has done almost every day since. We took the train, while our belongings went separately, couriered with the case files. It was a long journey, unnerving being the only ones in the carriage, rocked gently between the boggy-green hills. We spent most of the journey in silence, staring out at the rooks marshalling on the pitheads, glimpsed through the mists and sheeting rain.

I concentrated on a guidebook to the region that I had picked out of one of the boxes before the courier had collected them, prepared for the audit we were to conduct. It wasn't a typical guidebook, perhaps put there as a joke on the part of our colleagues; this is why I'd picked it out, and the writing style was eccentric, written by a resident of the region, in an almost



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polemical style.

*I should hate to be responsible for any similar misunderstandings. I would rather not be believed at all than be believed in such an uncritical way.*

Neither of us had visited the region we were travelling to before, it wasn't known as a tourist destination, not least because the weather was so bad. Tucked into the Northwest of the country it had devolved governance, was ruled as an aristocracy by those known within the region as The Founding Families, or more simply Families. Merchants who had declared themselves different from the rest of the country and whose access to natural resources meant their provocations were tolerated and a quasi-independence granted after a long-ago rebellion.

*All this had gradually changed towards the end of the Middle Ages, when the cities with their burghers and merchants became increasingly more important than the castles of the barons and the merchants became increasingly more important than the castles of the barons. The merchants spoke their native tongue and stood together against any foreign competitor or intruder.*

This was the second residential audit Lydia and I had been on together, the first was when we became a couple; something that was typical in our line of work. I guess we were hoping that the second one would return the spark that we'd felt on the first.

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She was reading a more contemporary summary of the region, political life there was currently marked by regular trials for corruption; people were starting to tire of the Families and accusations of corruption were levelled against them all. Blame had been shifted to one family and an audit into their accounts had been demanded which was to be our responsibility. It wasn't rare to find our audits newsworthy.

Occasionally we would break the silence of our journey to read aloud from our sources, I would adopt funny voices to add melodrama and make Lydia laugh.

*I feel the need to emphasize once more that this book is intended to be enjoyed as a story. To be sure, the story now continues beyond the point at which I left it in the first edition, but even these added episodes can only be fully understood in the light of what has gone before. I still hope for readers who would like to be told from the very beginning how it all happened.*



Our possessions and casework arrived not long after us, accompanied by our contact within the Family, a man called Ernest. He was also our host, as we were staying on their land. The accommodation was a converted folly in the estate of the large manor house that was the home of the Family. The folly had been built centuries ago to look like an observatory with the requisite domed roof, but it offered no opportunity for stargazing. I imagine it was an attempt to at least look

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like the Family were able to keep pace with the fashions of other Founding Families; I knew from my guidebook there were 16 observatories in the region. This space had long since been converted to living quarters.

“Gamekeeper used to live here actually when I was a boy,” Ernest said as part of a conversation we had in the doorway, sketching out his life story for us.

We were about half a mile away from the Hall, but it was visible from the back bedroom. Our space was delimited by a hedgerow, 100 years younger than the folly but giving it a front and back garden, and ringing our new home.

“You may be sharing the land soon I’m afraid,”

“How so?”

“With some statues,” Ernest said handing me an official looking sheet of paper; I recognised the region’s crest from our boxes of official documents. It read:

**Following the recent ruling by the court; ratified, supported and agreed with by the council it has been decided to move the statues, as in their current location they have consistently harboured evil spiritual forces, despite numerous warnings and exorcisms. Should the statues not relinquish their parasitic guests once in their new location they will not be moved again. Instead they will be destroyed; ground up to ensure they can no longer play the host.**

I looked up from the paper and back to Ernest, expecting some insight from him,

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“They’ll probably put them here,”

“Right,” Ernest rolled his eyes, in a ‘what can you expect?’ manner.

“And they are haunted?” I said with a laugh,

“Oh yes I’m afraid so, but there’s nothing I can do. Hands are tied, you know how it is,” he nodded toward the interior of our new house, I took his gesture to encompass our position as auditors, before continuing with a chuckle,

“Could be worse though, we could be statues ourselves. Anyway, they are currently in the square, if you want to check out your new neighbours. Should be quite a crowd this evening, when they make it official,” Ernest winked towards the edict I was still holding and then walked off with his hands in his jacket pockets. I went into the house to look for Lydia and tell her what Ernest had said.



*With some self-discipline and self-observation, we can all find out for ourselves that what we call seeing is invariably coloured and shaped by our knowledge (or belief) of what we see.*

We walked to the square in the evening. It was still raining, the ground was saturated, water wasn’t seeping into the roads but shimmering on top of them. We both had our hoods up. We could hear bells ringing in the distance; instinctively I looked at my watch but could see no correspondence between 19:25 and

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the repeated tolling, perhaps it was the prelude to the announcement. Lydia was in front of me, briskly sidestepping puddles, keen to get to there. The damp air smelt of smoke. There were a lot of people on the streets, pockets of steam where they were clustered like conspirators under the overhead lamps, the reflections of the lights were smeared down the streets. We turned a corner and onto the square.

There were people everywhere, applauding, chanting, cheering, screaming. Through the crowd we could see ten statues, sticking up like chimney stacks, the centre of everybody's attention. Somebody lit a flare and tossed it into the rectangular space delineated by the statues. They were lined up four wide and three deep but with a space in the centre; ten in total. The smoke and light of the flare forced us back into the arc of one of the buildings on the perimeter.

I wanted to look at them properly, tried to study them through eyes watering with the smoke. All ten were constructed to a similar design, were over fifteen-foot-tall cylinders carved from granite. For the first eight feet there were no sculpted markings though they were pitted with age. Then there were four busts, grotesques on top of one other as in a 'totem-pole.' Each face was about two-foot-high and had a line carved above and below it to delineate it from the head above and below, then a blank space on top, like a lid. All the statues' 'heads' faced the same way and had been positioned so that they faced away from one another and onto the buildings that lined the square. There was something bewitching about their expressions. I took a step

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toward them but felt Lydia, who had linked arms with me, pull me back. I looked at her and she gave me a nervous smile.

*We must not expect such sculptures to look as natural, graceful and light as classical works. They are all the more impressive because of their massive solemnity.*

The previously wild chanting regulated, and with an accompanying funereal beat stamped and clapped by the crowd cranes rolled into the square and toward the statues. Despite the aggressive atmosphere the statues were treated delicately; the chains of the crane were looped gently around a statue and padded with foam cushioning, the crane's arm then swung in small circles until the chain was wrapped completely around the statue without any slack. The crane continued to make these small circles but now lifted as it did so.

“What are they doing?”

“It's like they are going to unscrew it.”

Lydia was right, there was a heavy clunk as the statue was shifted from its moorings, the twisting continued, the four heads spinning, soon it was dangling off the ground and we could see the pin it had sat upon.

“Look at that, it's like they're designed to be moved around. I guess they never trusted them.”

Workmen guided it into a long bag that though it was made of a black fabric seemed to shimmer in the light. I squinted trying to ascertain what material the bag was made of but it was impossible. I wondered if it had some significance; was designed to prevent further

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haunting. We watched the rest of the statues being removed in silence. It felt important but neither Lydia nor I knew what to make of it.

At the other side of the square members of all the powerful Families were lined up on the steps of the town hall dressed in formal cloaks. Because of the unremitting weather they all had their cowls up and it occurred to me that this was maybe why the ritual dress was what it was, a practical consideration as well as ceremonial, though it did look sinister. Their outfits looked completely waterproof, I wondered if it was the same fabric as was housing the statues, which were now lain like kindling at the foot of the steps.

*We do not know how art began any more than we know how language started.*

A microphone was in front of the head of the council, distinguished by wearing the most vividly coloured coat; a magenta shocking in the grey night. He began reading from the sheet in his hands but I couldn't understand him. At first, I thought it was feedback or maybe water in the machinery but then I realised it was dialect. I couldn't understand a word he was saying. I gave Lydia an uneasy smile and kept watching, hoping it would be repeated in English. It was: The statues were to be our neighbours in a week's time. Lydia and I looked at each other and shrugged, while the townspeople cheered. I thought I saw Ernest slink away, an unreadable expression on his face.

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*There was no doubt something almost primitive and savage in some of its features, something which still linked an idol of this kind with the ancient superstitions against which the prophet Jeremiah had preached. But already these primitive ideas about gods as formidable demons who dwelt in the statues had ceased to be the main thing.*

In the intermittent week, we read everything we could in the guidebook and online about the statues. Built not long after the region had been assured its compromised autonomy, they were totemic of independence. Acting as both memorial for those Families that had lost their lives in the struggle they were also symbolic of the fresh start the region was granted, the chance to take back control and do things for themselves.

*They wanted to face the stark facts of our existence, and to express their compassion for the disinherited and the ugly. It became almost a point of honour with them to avoid anything which smelt of prettiness and polish, and to shock the 'bourgeois' out of his real or imagined complacency.*

We did think about the audit a little, talked through how it might work, we tried to unpack though it was difficult. It is never easy, but the statues had made us feel more transient, though I don't remember us ever in fact speaking about the possibility of leaving. I felt a little sick with tension the whole time, we couldn't relax.



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*For the first and perhaps only time, an artist had succeeded in giving concrete tangible shape to the fears that had haunted the minds of man in the Middle Ages. It was an achievement which was perhaps only possible at this very moment, when the old ideas were still vigorous and yet the modern spirit had provided the artist with methods of representing what he saw.*

Nevertheless, I also had three or four meetings with Ernest. That first week he would only meet me, Lydia he dealt with, with a troubled and condescending wince. All these meetings took place in the manor's old music room. There was a baby grand pushed against one of the walls, a table cloth thrown over it. At the other end of the room was a desk at which Ernest and I would sit looking for discrepancies in the accounts. Most of the time Ernest would just sit there staring into space and then say something inconsequential about his childhood.

“We used to call this the ‘faces room’.”

“Sorry?”

“As children I mean, because we could see faces in the wallpaper.”

The walls were lined in a heavy damask with ornate floral swirls decorating it. He stood up and drew imaginary lines around the shapes that he and his siblings had seen as faces, he was right; they looked like caricatures of expressions. He walked me around the room, making me stand in different positions to see how the light hit the walls at different angles, highlighting

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different hidden faces. I told him I agreed, and he came over and clasped my shoulder.

“I feel we really see eye to eye now, great stuff.”

While I was with Ernest Lydia concentrated on the actual casework, sorting through all the files we had and deciding on our strategy. By the end of the week the house was starting to look a little more ordered. It was reaching a stage where the things that hadn't been put away rankled because they stood out.

“Can't we get rid of these boxes?”

Was a refrain repeated by both of us, referring to the fat bunch of flat-packed boxes that we wanted to put outside but daren't as we knew the rain would quickly reduce them to claggy lumps. Instead we propped this structure in the corner of the kitchen and repeatedly knocked our toes against it until the edges shrank away from us.

I looked out again for some covered aspect for them, but every inch visible to me looked wet, bleakly painted in dark sodden colours. I watched the rain falling sideways before I went looking for Lydia and some comfort, in that weather it was hard not to want constant human contact.

*The quarrying and transport of stone, the erection of suitable scaffolding, the employment of itinerant craftsmen, who brought tales from distant lands, all this was a real event in those far-off days.*

At the end of the week we watched them erect the

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statues; it was an arduous process. They must have anticipated that it would take a long time as they brought floodlamps with them, which I assumed also meant that they were determined to be finished that day. They started at 6am, we were woken by the diggers crossing the grounds, but the Family were absent, confining themselves to the house. The statues were kept in their bags until the last possible moment.

New stands had been made for the statues, the newly forged metal was shiny even in that dull light. The first half of the day was spent digging out foundations for these new stands before the cement was poured in. Whilst the workmen were waiting for this to dry they rested and I thought I would talk to them, there was a huddle and a pair separated from the rest, I went to the two. I was determined not to sound arch but it was difficult; I couldn't talk about supernatural occurrences without feeling like I was speaking in quotation marks.

“So how do you think the statues will react to their new home?”

“Well they're already bringing their cloak.”

He swilled his mug in the direction of the fog that was settling around the grounds, I couldn't see the Hall anymore and the trees around the estate were disintegrating into the mist, they were just grey brushstrokes to me.

“They'll not do much harm here though, they won't be worried about you incomers, and the Family's carrying no weight.”

They had to switch the floodlamps on at 6pm, the rain danced in front of the vats of light, emphasising

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the blackness that swarmed around the rest of the estate.

There was an accident; I think a labourer slipped on the mud churned up by the diggers and constant rain. How was anything ever dug up here? Or maybe that was why it had to be done so quickly, to prevent the holes filling with water. I wasn't outside when it happened, but we heard the scream, the curses hurled at the statues, and, from the kitchen window, could see the ambulance arrive before carrying off a weeping workman, its blue lights tacking a course between the trees on the estate.

Eventually they got them up; we heard them leave and could just make out the ten stone cylinders from the back bedroom, monolithic and brooding in the night.

*But we must realise that each gain or progress in one direction entails a loss in another, and that this subjective progress, in spite of its importance, does not correspond to an objective increase.*



As opposed to their arrangement in the square the statues were positioned so they were all facing inwards, towards one another. It made standing in the middle of the circle quite intimidating, but I did it the next day, on my way up to the Hall. I looked more carefully at the faces and realised that there was an order to them.

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There seemed to be a familial relation between some of them. I guessed that of the forty faces I could see, there were eight distinct groups, or families.

I wanted to ask Ernest about them but we were distracted by the accounts and he wanted to show me some photographs of a dog they'd had as children.

That night we were both woken by a scraping noise, loud and unholy, we turned to each other our eyes wide. It was an unwilling, shrieking sound. Though we didn't speak I think Lydia, like me, thought straight away of the statues and we headed to the back bedroom to look at them. It was too black and foggy to see, but it did seem to be the direction the noise was coming from.

"I think there's a torch downstairs. You remember when we moved in there was that bunch of stuff under the sink?"

I realised quite how loud the sound was when I started talking. It was difficult to hear myself, difficult to think.

"Yes, but don't go. I don't think we should."

I looked at Lydia, she looked worried, looking up at me with her head angled slightly downwards like she was concentrating, I noticed her fists were clenched. And she looked determined. I felt the hairs on my neck twitching. I didn't want to worry her by going outside and there was something in that look on her face. We hugged and went back to bed. Sleep was impossible, we just lay there on our backs, our arms interlocked, staring at the ceiling, picking out shapes in the darkness, the whining grinding continued for an hour and I think

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I fell asleep about 30 minutes after that.

When I woke it was like coming out of a coma, like the fog outside had drifted into our house and into my mind, I couldn't think. I looked at my clock, it was almost midday. I went to look out onto the statues, but it was still too foggy to see them, though it did seem to have cleared a little. Lydia was stirring in the bedroom and shouting to her I got into the shower,

“God I can't believe how long we've slept.”

As I got out, Lydia called to me from the back, her voice sounded tight. She was staring out of the back window.

“Look.”

I followed her gaze and gasped. The statues had appeared out of the mist. They had moved during the night. Or the heads had moved. Now all four of the heads on all of the ten statues were facing our house, all appeared to be looking at us.

Walking to the house I avoided looking back over my shoulder. Thoughts swirled and circled in my head and I told myself the statues couldn't possibly be haunted. Ernest wasn't at the door but I thought I could hear the tinny notes of a piano that hadn't been played for a long time. Ernest normally met me at the front door but once had waited for me in the music room, so I headed there. The music stopped, and the house seemed quieter than normal, the kind of silence that seems to make plants twitch and the air felt damp. I felt myself getting tenser. I tried not to think about the statues. As I turned into the music room I couldn't see Ernest. I looked instead at the wallpaper,

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tracing with my eyes the faces we had seen within it. The faces looked more obviously there, and more realistic and I lingered on the threshold but didn't go in; there was a pervading sense of... I don't know how to describe it, malevolence, evil? But it rooted me to the spot. I managed to move my legs, they were stiff with adrenaline and I hurried out of the house, I wanted Lydia, she was stronger than me.

When I found her I relaxed a little. I was tired. I told her what happened, she listened and nodded and kissed me. It's funny how this brought us closer together, the problems that we had in the city were gone, being trapped together because of the rain and then the statues, it felt like we'd never been closer.

We spent the afternoon looking at files, not really working, cradling cups of tea, positing reasons or mechanisms, both logical and fantastical, that might explain how or why statues moved that we didn't really believe.

As evening fell I looked outside to see a woman talking to the statues. I went to chat to her, to try and find out more about them, but she ignored me and started instead shouting at the statues, haranguing them. She threw handfuls and handfuls of birdseed at them and seemingly instantly was joined by a murder of crows, that crowded around her and snaffled the seed. She left the birds there, atop the statues and all over the surrounding area. I had never been so close to a large flock of birds, it was unnerving in the mist and rain.

The statues moved again during the night, sleep was impossible; I would close my eyes and picture their

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leering faces revolving, imagining what I couldn't see. Lydia and I would lie closer and closer together, her head under my chin, her legs angled backward to allow mine to angle forward. We had begun to tessellate.

*It is the sober truth that our feelings about things do colour the way in which we see them and, even more, the forms which we remember. Everyone must have experienced how different the same place may look when we are happy and when we are sad.*

In the morning, all the birds were dead, lying like sods of earth on the grass. Lydia cried when she saw them. What do you do in that situation? I dug a grave big enough to fit them all in, sweating in the mizzle. We wore a gardening glove each and tossed the birds in, trying to do it as decorously as was possible. At first, I counted them as we threw them in but Lydia asked me to stop and I did. At that point, I had reached 20 and we weren't halfway through.

As I covered them with the soil she whispered something under her breath, a prayer maybe, and went back inside. I hugged her when I got in and washed. Then we finished the unpacking; there was a sense of having to make the best of it, that we had to get through this. The statues were there but so were we. I put the flat-packed boxes outside, let the rain have them, I thought, let the statues have them I caught myself thinking.



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*All passages in italics taken from:  
Gombrich, E. H. (1950) 2011 *The Story of Art*. 16th  
ed. (revised, expanded and redesigned) London: Phaidon  
Press Ltd.*

## The Zoo

A buttock-faced quadruped mewed in its cage.

I looked over as it performed small circles in the centre of the space, before settling down to sleep in the shadow of the fluorescent cacti that fringed its quarters.

The zookeeper hadn't taken his eyes from the board to observe what I assumed was a nightly performance. I looked at him, the blue-white light of the heat lamps reflected off his glasses.

Eventually he made his first move, as always he started from the corner, setting the sequence of his strategy, tonight's dance across the board, inexorably in motion.

Leaves had fallen through the roof of the umbraculo and were flat on the ground at our feet. Though it was night it was warm enough for us to be in this space, simultaneously interior and exterior. Like every living thing that surrounded me, the overlapping shapes of the fallen leaves were organic but unfamiliar, every living thing except for the zookeeper that was, who was waiting for me to make my move.

A pink-skin-coloured plant had furled itself along the structure overhead. Its meaty tendrils were so thick and sinewy that I felt I could hear it creak, growing

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above me in real time. Not for the first time I thought that this was a tactic on the part of the zookeeper to put me off my game, likewise the one-eyed birds that roosted along this fleshy tapestry seemed only to crow during my turn.

As always I started from the centre, wanting a point from which I could return and refer to.

As it was night he had locked us in; there were packs of wild dogs that wandered outside wanting ingress, waiting to rip the zoo animals into more familiar shapes with their teeth. We were closed off within the space, like the pieces within the game.

As we played I thought about painting.

As we played I talked about books.

I told him I had just read *The Master of Go* by Yasunari Kawabata. Apparently, it was the author's favourite of all of his works. Like all of those of his that I have read it is seemingly constructed about descriptions of nature, of tangerine groves and lawns and grass and soft and sweet air. Though the book is ostensibly assembled around an epic game of Go, I wondered if it wasn't in fact the seasons that shape this and all his stories.

The serene natural world of Kawabata had little in common with the abnatural shapes that surrounded me; the yellow "creeper-feeders" as the Zookeeper called them, canary-coloured caterpillars I could hear scream as they were eviscerated by the carnivorous vines. These were different spaces of different natures.

Implicit in these descriptions of the natural, and in the seasonal, is the passage of time. Time, or the

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depiction thereof, is a famous adversary of painting: Painting is an art of space, whereas literature is an art of time. So which is better for depicting a game? The one that shows the board, or the one that retells the moves. *The Master Of Go* contains some illustrations, just after a move has been played, a game shown in static abstract form. Is time better represented in abstraction?

And I am not sure that we enter the space of a painting, no matter how realistic, we no longer see the world as a churchgoer during the Renaissance, gasping when we realise the adjacent nave is actually a painting. In fact the paintings I like most deny me that space entirely, return my gaze unwaveringly and inscrutably, push me back into my mind and the worlds I find there.

I asked the zookeeper what he thought,

“Maybe playing a game with someone is the best way to describe space to that person? As two people can occupy it, even something as simple as a grid drawn on paper. Whereas with a painting the viewer and the artist take turns in front of it, and with a book the writer and reader commune at distance.”

During the game the zookeeper also told me that when he played he thought about missed opportunities, lost moments within the game and without. When a different move might have been taken, a different game unravelled, a different life lived, a different time.

The possibilities were endless, this is what we wanted from the game, and this is what terrified me about the game.

*Marry, and you will regret it; don't marry, you will also*

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*regret it; marry or don't marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the world's foolishness, you will regret it; weep over it, you will regret that too; laugh at the world's foolishness or weep over it, you will regret both. [i]*

“Apparently there are more possibilities in Go than there are atoms in the visible universe,” the zookeeper told me with a rueful smile.

“I sometimes wonder if this is a space I am perhaps scared of leaving,” he said, sweeping his hand over the board regally. I looked at him, he wasn't looking at me as he spoke, instead the two trapezoids of his spectacles were fixed on our game.

The zoo wasn't a space one got used to and I could never resist looking about me whilst waiting for my turn, at the claws moulted by the apes the keeper had bred, sitting gnarled and chewy on the footpath I took to the toilet.

“The hand remembers the moves it has made,” he said, as if he knew what it was I was looking at,

“You mean?”

“That even if I forget the moves I have made, my hand doesn't, it knows when to retrace its steps. It knows when to take a new path, I don't commit strategy to memory, my hands remember. I guess painting is like that for you?”

“Have you done any painting today?” he asked me whilst I was still considering the appropriateness of the simile.

I tilted my head to the left, in an ‘if-that’s-what-you-want-to-call-it-then-yes’ gesture. He nodded,

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“Painting is slow, the game is slow.”

Like beginning any game when you begin a painting all options are open to you but every mark you make limits you, defines the next mark you might make, wherever on the canvas you might start. That is why we keep playing the game, to try and exhaust every opportunity, that is why we keep painting, to try and paint every picture.

He told me he was reading *The Leopard*, an animal not contained within his zoo.

[i] *From Either/Or: A Fragment of Life by Søren Kierkegaard*

## The River Widens

“You never read *Under the Volcano* did you?”

A direction carved by lorries led me away from the buildings, the ground queasy with oil. Where it curled rightwards toward the main road I went left over a stile toward the river. From this elevated vantage point I could see cars lined up one by one along the roadside like a row of dominoes.

My route had taken me between garages and stone warehouses, the air fizzy with the blast of welding. Where the chemical scent of old analogue industry had tugged at my memory.

I continued alongside a stream cloaked with riverweed, meadows fired wildflowers through the walls they lay behind. I walked along a dirt track between the fields. There was no one around though there was evidence of humanity in the echoes of gunshots, that stilted crack of air, familiar and yet still foreign. The path gave way to grass, matted at first, flattened by vehicles, people and animals but strengthening and wilder the more I walked, until I was just tacking arbitrarily from one empty field to the next with the tussocks of grass eddying at my feet.

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There were shipping containers everywhere in the landscape, shelled like nuts.

Fifty yards further on I pissed at the riverside, between the blackened smudges of old fires that freckled the landscape. Across the swollen Thames I could see slag heaps and watched the trucks feeding them for a while before a boat passed in front of me, buffeted by the current and I thought of the all the bodies that for centuries had been poured, dropped, thrown, slipped, tossed, forced, fallen, slipped, or jumped into the water.

In the next field two wild horses chomped at the weeds that harassed the fencing. There were some cement ramparts dashed in white paint, that I guessed dated from World War Two. There was a fresh creamy wound chiselled into the concrete and I ran my fingers around its cuboid edges.

These fortifications made me think of the beginning of *Under the Volcano*, with M. Laurelle walking home, climbing toward the dilapidated pink palace of Maximillian, with its dashed pillars and pools lush with algae, evoking the ghosts of the emperor and Carlotta, turning his mind to lovers moved.

I couldn't read that passage without my mind moving with Laruelle's, beyond the clefts of Mexico to Trieste and to every corner of entwined couples, to every tryst within every journey, to these soft and silent places.

A face cradled like a mandolin in a painting by Watteau, by slender fingers, artful and delicate, a face cradled before a kiss.

The book made me want to paint the places where



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we should've made love: benches for quick fucks and hedgerows and gravestones to be leant against. Snaking roads glimpsed from heathery banks that would clothe your legs bent, your knees skyward.

This was such a place and I pictured you there with me. I imagined running strands of hair behind your ear, the cross stitch of our fingers as we walked around the ruins, looking at the white paint that had bubbled and puckered under the sun.

Pulling down your pants, the elastic rolling under my fingers, helping them around the curve of your buttocks.

Crouching down and licking with the width of my tongue a wide smile that ran down from your navel, between your legs, and up to the base of your spine, reversing, re-drawing the line with my tongue daintily tipped. Your thigh mussing my hair as you roll your leg to allow my face to pass.

Later as we lay, lay siege to the battlements your fingertips work the moss from the shrunken brickwork, as you steady yourself, as my own hands knead you toward me.

“But you never read *Under the Volcano* did you?”

## We Had Stayed Up All Night

“Anyway, we died,”  
We sang and laughed.

We had stayed up all night my friends and I, after finishing work that day; another shift spent landfill-mining that we fitted around school or sport or band practice. In trainers bought to degrade rather than practice we'd headed out early in hooded tops, cowed against the chill of a sky that had been cloudless for days; beautiful at night, chilly in the mornings, baking in the afternoon and blissful in the evenings.

These tops were soon tied around our waists then slung onto trolleys with our cargo: Plastics peeled from beneath the flotsam and jetsam of generations, the grime stuck beneath our fingernails, making the creases in our hands profound.

When I returned home my sister would screw her nose up, raising her owlish glasses a centimetre higher at the smell that enrobed me. A peculiarly putrid scent that had evolved as stubbornly as the plastic had refused decay.

The money I waved at her ‘pee-yew’ face was fresh though, and what other jobs could I do whilst

## WE HAD STAYED UP ALL NIGHT

still at school, regular but without routine. We simply needed to turn up and Gerrard the supervisor would point us toward whichever swell of detritus we would be scavenging that day. We carried the sieves and spades off the barrow we left at the foot of the heap. Our trainers found traction on the foothills of the rubbish and we set off across them, dozy with the morning.

The air was particularly heavy as it was such a hot day, the smell rising to meet the sun. We'd ignore it, put it out of minds, until bursting.

“Fucking Stinks!”

One of us would shout. T-shirts pinned over mouth and nostrils. If you weren't careful the smell could catch the back of your throat and you'd gag, that hollow gasp, the click as your throat contracts.

It was still fun.

We'd tried getting work in police line-ups, but it wasn't regular enough and I'd never get chosen, laughed out by defendant's solicitors at the disparity between me and their clients,

“You're just too fucking nice Mike, that's why you can't get a girlfriend,”

Martin would say.

My mum, sorting my washing, the jeans and t-shirts I wore for work, band prints washed into lines, said I'd never get a girlfriend working the landfill,

“Smelling like flies in husk.”

“Then how come Martin's got one?”

I'd reply, and she'd laugh inconclusively, not letting my logic deny her the pleasure of teasing me.

Bas too had had girlfriends, though they weren't

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

as keen on him as Catherine was on Martin, she'd meet us outside the 'fill. Kiss him, press her blonde bob into his chest, the crown of her head finding comfort in his armpit. Her ardour embarrassed me. She had soft-looking lips and a laugh that surprised me with the fullness of its sound, as whole and hearty as an apple. Bas had kissed her before she'd started seeing Martin, but it was nothing serious. Drunk, weed-smoking kissing of in consequence and inebriation. Now though it was impossible to think of her as anything but Martin's girlfriend.

I longed for an inconsequential kiss but couldn't conceive of a gesture without consequence.

We liked the work because it provided us with things, 'merch' we'd called it. I found things to make art with or about, Bas found bits for bikes. Martin found tokens, artefacts, treasure, and stuff to muck around with.

"Heads,"

He'd call as a hubcap was frisbeed toward us, skimming along the shoals of rubbish, kicking up stink and sending creatures scampering. As the weather warmed up we'd share our workplace with more and more wildlife, seagulls, foxes, insects. The rats we'd feel rather than see, rippling beneath us.

When we'd complain about the heat or the smell, one of us would remark we were lucky. That in bigger cities people queued to do work like this.

It was so hot my sweat smelt like off-milk that day.

"The three bin men of the apocalypse," my dad called us, "harbour, pestilence and fart."

## WE HAD STAYED UP ALL NIGHT

It was so hot some of the metal would burn when we'd grab it, once a grid pattern was seared was onto the fingerprint of my fingertip, so that as it healed it looked like the weave of a basket unpicked.

Once when setting aside some billboards that I'd keep, would take to school to paint on, I'd met a man who said he was an artist, there collecting for his own work. He'd talked to me for a long time of the tradition of working with waste, of Garbology. He'd talked in short sentences and non-sequiturs of work scavenged by artists from the street. He'd travelled, he said, and told me of producing this work on residencies,

"I know that we started in spring," he said, "because it was warm enough to wheel an amplifier through the streets of New York."

He talked about using the particular waste of particular places to produce portraits of countries. We are what we refuse, we are our refuse.

In the evening we threw frisbee and drank beer, lit garden flares in Bas's garden. He showed us the bike he was building, he'd found all the bits in the landfill, walking into the garage he took a cap from a hook and pulled it onto his head in one motion. The hat, once red, was the whitest pink, oil and paint stained,

"It was my Grandad's," he had told us,

We looked at a frame in the middle of the garage, freshly sprayed black and shadowed by black lines on the cement floor.

He was building one for me. But I was particular and waiting for him to find just the right parts.

Martin talked about the way Catherine tasted

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and Bas grinned knowingly. They talked about girls they'd slept with, I talked about girls I liked. I didn't have these stories, it was a way of thinking that I did not yet feel part of, a topology I had not yet learnt. At a lull I changed the subject, pointed to the dawn and told them how I'd read my favourite line in a book from the beginning of the twentieth century,

“strange how a shudder always passes through the air just before sunrise.”

# The Forest Still

In the forest lying still, resting in the itchy silence.

Uncompromising shapes smatter the darkness. I rubbed my hand through my sticky muzzle, my mouth smeared with menstrual blood. I could hear the honks and breaths of the ferry as it pulled away taking you with it.

You left the forest tired and excited, radiating heat we kissed goodbye.

There were the occasional mutterings, whisperings of machinery within the forest, but I knew I wouldn't see any of the city's instrumentation. You and I had looked for it, parting leaves crisper beneath the sun as we explored. We had spent five days together camped in this forest, living by her provision. Sheltered by the constant tree canopy, leaves conjecturing against the darkness, primeval and daunting.

These natural shapes hovered into one another, a blackness that lapped at my conscious whilst I slept and made leaving difficult, had mugged my mind.

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

I had dreamt in vine, in the curlicues of the lianas.

The soft colours of your skin seem a long way from the thick darkness of the pulsating vegetation. Heavy and molten, with leaves that would brush one another with a velvety sound, foliage that caressed. Feathery bulging flowers, lava-like blooms and petals that drifted floorward as delicately as a finger run along a thigh.

You left the forest sweaty and beautiful. Beneath the hiss of the flood, you went to take the boat.

We had watched the rain come down in sheets, in constellations.

Pricks of light, beads of sweat, flecks of hair.

Islands of moss, shifted from the outcrop we'd sheltered under on our walk, on our hunt for the machine that corrupted the forest, slid downward.

I readied myself to leave.

Beyond the opening to the glade, where I left my bike the city winked her lights at me and the arch of the bridge sighed a line through the sky. At the cusp of the horizon solar flares fizzed constantly, and I wearily made my way toward them.



# The Polycephalus

As I took her arm she stared through my face at the dark branches of the trees over my head. We held this pose for a moment, frozen in a tango, before she blinked as if waking, and lead me up the stairs to her studio, welcoming me over her shoulder as she did so, “Captain? Love the title, so nice to tell people!”

This was the first time I’d visited, I was buzzed entry through one set of gates, then had to cross a courtyard, the clip of my boots echoing about me. Knowing I was being observed, the watcher watched, and my collar itched at the thought of snipers.

She met me at the second gate, beneath two bare plane trees and lead me up to her studio within one of the old warehouses that enclosed the courtyard. As soon as I entered I was struck by how cold it was, my gasp visible as my breath turned to steam.

Whilst she was making tea in the kitchenette I looked around the studio, it had a floor of ceramic tiles the colour of caramelised sugar. I began to examine the notes, photographs and paintings that covered the walls. I didn’t know what had been done for us and what was her own artwork. She was an artist before

## STORIES FOR PAINTINGS

we recruited her to spy for us and still is I imagine; I haven't seen her since our run of meetings ended.

The information on the walls was arranged so densely it was difficult to see individual items, it was a mess of symbols and images, of photographs, notes and paintings. There were representations of everything; a greasy pillow, Nordic House, a haircut, there were flying things to disrupt surveillance, lamplighters, scalphunters, shoemakers, parts of bodies pinned together with stumps jutting out, a croissant, markings that formed a kind of grate. There was dissemblance and figuration, gigantic floating franken-symbols, small icons, the votive, the iconoclastic, politics, botany, the aquatic, hobbies, male pattern baldness, growing plants, a vessel of some kind, a stomach swilling and churning, paintings gone bad, a painting going well, a lone shoe in the street, a monster, a knight, an angel, mutterings and anti-mandalas, a waterfall.

Scrawled high on one wall was the phrase 'RABBIT HUTCH GRAB.'

There were only a couple of windows, small and out of the way. The light came instead from the large skylights overhead, which whenever I was there, showed a sky the rich cobalt blue of twilight, as I always visited at the same time.

She entered, passing me a cup of black tea. As she blew the steam off the cup she was holding she flicked her head toward the large painting I was standing in front of.

"I often think that the first painting done in a new studio is sort of an outlier, it often doesn't fit into either

## THE POLYCEPHALUS

the work that you did in the old studio, or the work that you do in the new one. And maybe you don't show it, but you like it, so you keep it. The paintings that you keep tend to be these outliers that don't feel related to the rest of your work."

I only knew her by her cover name; The Polycephalus, so called as she had run so many operatives for us, though by the time of our meeting it was down to just six. Most of them were also artists or writers or others of that type, people who made time to drift and mooch, to observe.

She collected material for us in a manner of forms, from her own assignments and those of her agents. There were photographs, texts, recordings, both written and spoken, coded dispatches for us to unravel. And there were her paintings. These were memories of things she had witnessed, and of things she had imagined from what she had been told by lovers who had whispered sweet secrets and state nothings. Her mind visualising these occurrences in paint whilst her head rested in the crook of their arm.

She used to report to Oblomov who told me how she had described these trysts; that afterwards she would sit on the edge of the bed trying to fix the image that she was going to paint for us. Trying to force this objectless image into her brain matter.

We set up regular meetings for debriefing: I was to visit every night for a week and by the end was supposed to know everything she knew, but obviously that was impossible. I spent hours in that studio staring

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at a wall, things constantly being playing out in my mind, conversations, the fictional, the real, over and over, and over again. My hope was to piece together this irregular pattern of extremely impulsive thoughts into a trail we could follow. But the chain that I was left with was one of constant erasure and by the time I arrived at the end, the links had been completely forgotten. I often wonder how I would have benefited had those missing trails remained.

To work quicker I started to take down short notes in quick succession or memorise one or two keywords that I would then later expand and elaborate on. I looked back at my notes and found that I wrote vaguely and obscurely, had kept the relationship between the truth and fiction translucent. I have to admit that, at first, I was reluctant to believe in the worth of her work, and challenged her,

“So, can we trust these paintings? Are they accurately depicting what you were told? Or what you experienced?”

“I’m not saying that painting records. I never have.”

“Okay, well can you tell me more, I am interested in how you see these operating.”

“Painting as a way of expression or communication lies somewhere between spoken and written language. Painting is, in my case, both intuitive and analytical. Often in that order.”

“Painting is a way of expressing or communicating lies?”

“Yes, I think the painting is not of the moment

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while being inextricably inter-woven with that moment, that conversation, that conflict; it acts as a catalyst, as an impulse for the act of making.

The possibilities among these marks or words or images are important, things which have no relation to their natural order suddenly pacify in each stain, drip, blob, and smear. They appear to congeal, and thoughts become etched into a moment, or more precisely, a habit. And in turn, through the contemplation of this surface, each idea, word or moment running through my head, has space to intensify, making it conceivable to take control.”

I looked at her blankly,

“Let me try to explain myself: One could easily consider that the gaze upon a painting and reading a text could be seen as an act that are closely related. I understand that, but I often think of it differently, one doesn’t really read a painting but just takes it in. I’m quite sure I don’t even use any words within my internal conversation about this experience. The words only happen if I must address the experience through conversation with someone else. So, these paintings address the gestalt of the experiences and should be read as such.”

Though I would prod her with questions, I was often silent, taking notes whilst she talked. I would move around her studio sometimes, examining things; continually trying to work out which notes pertained to her art and which to her work, or vice versa. On that first visit I picked a notebook from a pile on a table.

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“Do you keep a journal? Notebooks make a fool of me continually,” she said, barking with laughter as she spoke.

I saw that the mixture was too dense, her observations were so thoroughly intermingled with thoughts about her paintings that I had to change tact. Whereas before I tried to keep her on track, to divulge what she had been told in the line of our work, I realised the only way to continue was to make her think about it as a painter; I tried to coerce the knowledge out of her by talking about painting;

“Okay yes, I can imagine that this is true; that we look at paintings without words in our heads. So, there is a loss of memory between writing something down and then making a painting of it? And notes are lost as they are painted, and you talk about finding a space / place for them. It made me think that you are painting in these gaps; In these losses of memory, in these spaces. Is this where painting exists? In this lacuna? I mean between the start of the painting and the completed object.”

“Painting is a murky business, a bit of mess, slipping and sliding, it all gets heaved into the pot. And you are working with wet dust, slabbering something rich and lively onto something old and dead. And yes, it’s obviously also a way of thinking. My favourite way of doing so I guess, and my favourite painters think, spit, speak, stutter, slur in their own sort of painterly idiolect.”

Sometimes we’d play back the recordings one of her

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agents, Justine, had made in the Arts' Club. We knew it was used as a meeting place for several interested analogue parties. Each recording began with a click and then a gulp of static;

*A cluster or cloud, in which case maybe we'd need more... and then a cephalopod, an edgeless, light, nimble thing malleable to its mood...I'm not yet sure if I can make it to Italy, though I'm very into the idea of going...Yes. I have a big mostly black one I really like, but it's a weirdo too...I'm not sure where I will be in January...warmest wishes from Rome...*

She would help me decode these tracks of non-sequiturs, listened to with eyes clamped shut and nodding.

“All these words have potency when they swim near a painting. I've transcribed a couple of things. I do switch languages in the notes and will put the English translation in brackets. But I tend to use English language when I think about work. I'm not sure why that is, but we could try to analyse it. There are languages that I feel comfortable using, but I do not necessarily 'get them'.”

She wiped her mouth, and looked around before continuing,

“Thinking about it, there are so far two ways of handling writing for me. One is the writing that I do myself as a follow-up to either experiences or something I've observed happening; I take very short notes and lists, at times just naming a space, place or event. I use them. Some experiences seem to involve more than observation, and the body becomes the tool

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and support.”

“It sounds almost... primal.”

She ignored me,

“With the body and the written down words I have a possibility to remember something. At the same time,”

I interrupted her,

“How do we know that you won’t forget this thing and end up making a painting, not a painting of a memory, reaching beyond what you know about the situation?”

“It’s the trouble of experiencing an idea or thought in the shape words take. I find ideas quite disturbing, I don’t know how to paint them, yet they seem necessary to get to paint. I experience, or maybe I think about, the process as a multi-layered one, of back and forth translation and the joy of getting lost and present in that space. You kind of get washed over with the things that are surrounding you. They and you are picked up by the tide of circumstance and that is the painting.

Recently I have experienced a direct connection between encounters and images – to the point that, the physically felt event, is pierced with a clear ideation of a painting. I have felt a range of charged, complex responses; unease, disgust, distress, arousal, and these feelings can reverberate over time, changing and even distancing themselves from the actual encounter so I am only left with the pliant memory of the emotion. And though most of them didn’t actually turn into a painting they sure fed into the work.”



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“Which work? Your work for us or your artwork?”

She ignored me again.

*But this is not the end for the cursed patches...like rare objects and swinging necklace...an albatross...singed and greasy...this leader must be killed...making contact with some new space age material...and you do kill it...walking back a few steps to see what has happened...they follow the eel...*

Sometimes I lost myself so completely in our conversations that when I read back through my notes that I am not sure which one of us is speaking.

“It’s hard to explain specifically but there are feelings here, undercurrents. I get a sense of things?”

“What kind of things?”

“Things between the written and the spoken,”

“I think I understand what you mean. I like what you say about it being between spoken and written language, like a third form, but one that we can’t talk about using, the same language with which we might compare the spoken or written language, how grammar is different in those two forms.”

“This is exactly what I mean sometimes we think in words, in stories, even in storylines. And I think that the word line might be an important one here: different lines of thought, but filtered and brought together in our heads. Well, mostly I can only speak for myself here. One line for words, another one for these other elements that you speak of, images, sounds, smell and so on... They will run simultaneously but can be edited individually.”

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“Maybe painting is more within life.”

“I do believe that painting is within life, the act of painting, that is. Looking at it too, but that’s actually closer to writing or even reading.”

“Hold that thought.”

“It’s complete nonsense, I know.”

“I’ve done nothing quickly to be honest.”

*They are an antidote...flying papers...they are leftovers...a simpler sensation...they loop...buttons...invocations...sigils...loaded...the supernatural...the visible...*

In one session we read the notes of one of her operatives, Angelico, presented to her scrawled on the back of bus tickets, beer mats, serviettes and lottery tickets. They were the ciphers our enemies were using and his attempts to decode them:

**Sink Friendship**

**RKV**

**Children’s Section**

**Around the Lake Exit**

**Hot Foggy Mess**

**Pen**

**shout / street / supermarket / bike**

**Horns and Claws and Cloak**

She looked at me as we came to the end of this list,

“This is one of the beautiful things about reading, and the potential to make paintings about writing— the

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endless intricacies of language make interpretations intimate and personal and we take a sensation, a sliver and make something from it that is intuitive and one's own."

"Do you try and paint the way that books make you feel?"

"I experience the same undulating movement when painting as when I am reading; a muted gradual development of a plot versus the sharp turn of events is like digesting the appearance of a painting while waiting for the paint to dry versus a quick brush stroke that spontaneously formulates a shape on a canvas.

There are slight fundamental differences though; reading is about unfolding and re-living the moment, whereas painting is about creating the moment and responding to it at the same time. A constellation that sort of bleeds into one another enough, with every painting a stepping stone to the next, just far enough away not to repeat but close enough to make the step.

But the hand will always be slower than the mind. When I paint about writing, which is roughly every time I paint, I search for what we could call graphical solutions for words. How can I tell you the way that person felt when they told me what they did?"

*The smell of a Gold pen... The first one I'd have to ask for, I don't have it around anymore... borrow from other fields... an ambivalent relationship to repetition... reach for other systems that are somewhat also endogenous... which is hilarious...*

And of course, she had made copious notes herself.

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“Words belong to something else, I borrow them to write. Words come from the same place as hands come from. They press and hack, like tools, always short, sharp movements. I write in stunted lines, and join them up. Words, writing, fiction, they are built by one another, like verse, chapter, book. I cannot see them in any other way, they all break down to the same value as material.

And they must be physical materials which I can dilute into feelings. There are words that belong to me and there are all the other words.”

**Cave dripping**

**Flat Bread**

**Roma**

**End of World**

**Stones / Slope**

**Docile Zombie Scouts dipping / dunking**

**hand on chest**

**Estate Agent Sex Slippers**

Sometimes I would imagine that I was painting a portrait of her, chimeric and transcendent. It would give me the opportunity to handle her story with a softer grip, to think about her hallucinations and satirical humour with lightness, nodding toward her without the pressure of embodying her, of transcribing her for my employers.

I imagined her as a Polycephalus, the six heads swooping and circling in front of me, in constant search for equilibrium, like a cloud of starlings flocking

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in flight, ducking and weaving, like the tendrils of a sea anemone wriggling in the current.

Sometimes I'd imagined these heads masked, arguing with one another, about painting, about writing, about spying.

*Big Head Little Face...grabbing and snapping, savagely timed and viciously quick...I really like them, I'd like something with their flying capabilities...you never drink them...watch from the perimeter...innumerable and elastic...sensation and reflection...pinching the skin of the rabbit for control...attached to the temples of moving information...a huge chunk of head in fact...like an appendix.*

“How aware are you of what you are doing when working?”

“As I work I try to observe and document the steps I take in the work itself and in a notebook, it is an intuitive and simple process. I'm not cutting out the fun and I plan much more than usual, but do it as I go along. I find methods / signs to know what is what that I can read and track back the steps I took, as there are many similarities going on. I feel a little weird about it and besides enjoying it I keep asking why I am doing this.

The letters and letters I posted are part of it and the big fleshy canvas as well. I'm not even sure what that is, but it is a spreading of words and phrases and an attempt to find an appropriate space for them, not a system, but a place of belonging.

I find that in fiction you can change things so

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quickly, you don't have to justify as much. It's written down somewhere."

"This fictionalising of lives; is this what painting does, is this why we like it?"

"Sorry, I've not been listening to you. I've been captivated by myself, by not being able to figure out if my paintings tell a story or not."

"What has happened to your operatives?"

"Your operatives, you mean,"

I didn't respond to this, so she continued, but angrier,

"Flatly, they are the ignored, forgotten, blown into the silvery metallic night-time abyss that the grubby studio floor occupies in the day. They slip and wiggle into the shimmering mercury underworld where they wait for you to invoke them. You never renew them, they just keep, unquestioned and unnoticed, predestined to become displaced, tied up, and to mingle with everything else."

I changed the subject, used her speech to question her about the studio which I had become increasingly fascinated by, saw it as fundamental to our work. I rolled my finger in a circle as I asked,

"What about this space?"

"The studio collects habits, so do paintings. They are steeped in them. Habits for me are what bonds painting and words, and words and painting; it's a reciprocal thing for sure. And painting is just a part, or sub-section of thinking, a kind of 'plug-in', or tributary that runs alongside a larger river.

I hardly ever sit on the edge of beds any more,

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yet I do sit (and lie) on my studio floor for hours. I've exchanged the location but not the activity. This is why the studio is so important to me, it is a place that holds a concern for all those other lives, places, types of violence, sadness, and fulfilment."

Pacified, she then asked me a question;

"I'd like to read your notes; what you write is very relevant to me, how you are forming the correlation between conversation, fiction & painting will provide really rich ground,"

"Maybe,"

I answered, uncertain now in her presence. But the last time I saw her, on the Sunday of that week, I asked her if I could have one of her works and we swapped a copy of my notes for a painting she had done of the night water.



Though I am listed as the sole author of *The Polycephalus*, it would be more accurately described as a collective piece of writing as it came from months of interviews with five other artists; namely Christiane

Bergelt, Olarn Chiaravanont, Rasmus Nilausen, Catherine Parsonage and Ross Taylor, on the subject of writing and painting. Some of their responses have been pasted more or less verbatim into this narrative so it is no exaggeration to say that without them this narrative wouldn't exist, and my role has been as much editor as storyteller.





# Postface

Further information on the texts:

0. *He Collects Writing* was written for an object given to me by artist Sian Collins.

1. *Morta Della* was written for the Romanesque artwork of Catalunya. An earlier version appeared in ‘The Happy Hypocrite<sup>10</sup> – Tolstoyevsky’.

2. *The Organism* was written for the performance ‘Tortuga’ by Ariadna Guiteras.

3. *The Battle of San Romano* was written for the three-panel painting of the same name. An earlier version was published by Taylor & Francis as part of an article; ‘The Story of the Third Object’, in ‘New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing’.

4. *Shifting* was written for ‘The Story of Art’ by E. H. Gombrich, E. H. An earlier version appeared in ‘Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture Issue 43 - Spring 2018’.

5. *The Zoo* was written for the paintings of Olarn Chiaravanont in 2017.

6. *The River Widens* was written for a selection of photographs by Edward Newton.

7. *We Had Stayed Up All Night* was written for the piece 'trouwe & lazy' by Sebastian Rozenberg, and was commissioned as part of 'Feel The Discourse!', an exhibition at Guest Projects curated by Cristina Ramos.

8. *The Forest Still* was written for the room of Clyfford Still paintings in the 'Abstract Expressionism' exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2016.

9. *The Polycephalus* was written and published for the exhibition 'As I Took Her Arm She Stared Through My Face At The Dark Branches Of The Trees Over My Head', at Yellow, Varese.



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***THE POLYCEPHALUS***

***MICHAEL LAWTON***



As I took her arm she stared through my face at the dark branches of the trees over my head. We held this pose for a moment, frozen in tango, before she blinked as if waking, and lead me up the stairs to her studio.

“Captain? Love the title, so nice to tell people!!”

This was the first time I’d visited. An old warehouse with a floor of ceramic tiles the colour of caramelised sugar. As soon as I entered I was struck by how cold it was. Whilst she was making tea in the kitchenette I look around at the notes, photographs and paintings that covered the walls. I didn’t know what had been done for us and what was her own artwork. She was an artist before we recruited her to spy for us and still is now I imagine. I haven’t seen her since our run of meetings ended.

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“I often think that the first painting done in a new studio is sort of an outlier, it often doesn’t fit into either the work that you did in the old studio, or the work that you do in the new one. And maybe you don’t show it, but you like it, so you keep it. The paintings that you keep tend to be these outliers that don’t feel related to the rest of your work.”

I only knew her by her cover name; The Polycephalus, so called as she had run so many operatives for us, though by the time of our meeting it was down to just six. Most of them were also artists, or others of that kind, people who made time to drift and mooch, to observe.

She collected material for us in a manner of forms, from her own assignments and those of her agents. There were photographs, texts, recordings, both written and spoken, coded dispatches for us to unravel. And there were her paintings. These were memories of things she had witnessed, and of things she had imagined from



what she had been told by the lovers she had taken; government functionaries who had whispered sweet secrets and state nothings, her head resting in the crook of their arm, visualising these occurrences that she would then paint.

She used to report to Oblomov who told me how she had described these trysts; that afterwards she would sit on the edge of the bed trying to fix the image that she was going to paint for us. Trying to force this objectless image into her brain matter.

We set up regular meetings for debriefing, I was supposed to know everything she knew within the six weeks we had scheduled, but obviously that was impossible. I spent hours in that studio staring at a wall, things constantly being playing out in my mind, conversations, the fictional, the real, over and over, and over again. My hope was to piece together this irregular pattern of extremely impulsive thoughts into a trail we could follow. But the chain that I was left with was one of constant erasure and by the time I arrived at end, the links had been completely forgotten. I often wonder how I would have benefited had those missing trails remained. So as to work quicker I started to take down short notes in quick succession or memorise one or two keywords that I would then later expand and elaborate on. I look back at my notes and find that I wrote vaguely and obscurely, had kept the relationship between the truth and fiction translucent.

“So, can we trust these paintings? Are they accurately depicting what you were told? Or what you experienced?”

“I’m not saying that painting records. I never have.”

“Okay, well can you tell me more, I am interested in how you see these operating.”

“Painting as a way of expression or communication lies somewhere between spoken and written language. Painting is, in my case, both intuitive and analytical. Often in that order.”

“Painting is a way of expressing or communicating lies?”

“Yes, I think the painting is not of the moment while being inextricably inter-weaved with that moment, that conversation, that conflict; it acts as a catalyst, as an impulse for the act of making.

The possibilities among these marks or words or images are important, things which have no relation to their natural order suddenly pacify in each stain, drip, blob, and smear. They appear to congeal, and thoughts become etched into a moment, or more precisely, a habit. And in turn, through the contemplation of this surface, each idea, word or moment running through my head, has space to intensify, making it conceivable to take control.”

I looked at her blankly, ‘gone out’ as people say in my home town,

“Let me try to explain myself: One could easily consider that the gaze upon a painting and reading a text could be seen as an act that are closely related. I understand that, but I often think of it differently; one doesn’t really read a painting but just take it in. I’m quite sure I don’t even use any words within my internal conversation about this experience. The words only happen if I have to address the experience through conversation with someone else. So, these paintings address the gestalt of the experiences and should be read as such.”

Though I would prod her with question, I was often silent, taking notes whilst she talked. I would move around her studio sometimes, examining things; continually trying to work out which notes pertained to her art and which to her work, or vice versa. On that first visit I picked a notebook from a pile on a table.

“Do you keep a journal? Notebooks make a fool of me continually,” she said, barking with laughter as she spoke.

I saw that the mixture was too dense, her observations were so thoroughly intermingled with thoughts about her paintings that I had to change tact. Whereas before I tried to keep her on track, to divulge what she had been told in the line of our work, I realised the only way to continue was to make her think about it as a painter, I tried to coerce the knowledge out of her by talking about painting;

“Okay yes, I can imagine that this is true; that we look at paintings without words in our heads. So, there is a loss of memory between writing something down and then making a painting of it? And notes are lost as they are

painted? and you talk about finding a space / place for them. It made me think that you are painting in these gaps? In these losses of memory, in these spaces. Is this where painting exists? In this lacuna? I mean between the start of the painting and the completed object.”

“Painting is a murky business, a bit of mess, slipping and sliding, it all gets heaved into the pot. And you are working with wet dust, slabbering something rich and lively onto something old and dead. And yes, it’s obviously also a way of thinking. My favourite way of doing so, I guess and my favourite painters think, spit, speak, stutter, slur in their own sort of painterly idiolect.”

Sometimes we’d play back the recordings one of her agents, Justine, had made in the Arts’ Club. We knew it was used as a meeting place for a number of interested analogue parties.

*A cluster or cloud, in which case maybe we’d need more...and then a cephalopod, an edgeless, light, nimble thing malleable to its mood... I’m not yet sure if I can make it to Italy, though I’m very into the idea of going... Yes. I have a big mostly black one I really like, but it’s a weirdo too... I’m not sure where I will be in January...warmest wishes from Rome...*

She would help me decode these tracks of non-sequiturs, listened to with eyes clamped shut and nodding.

“All these words have potency when they swim near a painting.

I've transcribed a couple of things. I do switch languages in the notes and will put the English translation in brackets. But I tend to use English language when I think about work. I'm not sure why that is, but we could try to analyse it. There are languages that I feel comfortable using, but I do not necessarily 'get them'."

She wiped her mouth, and looked around before continuing,

"Thinking about it, there are so far two ways of handling writing for me. One is the writing that I do myself as a follow-up to either experiences or something I've observed happening; I take very short notes and lists, at times just naming a space, place or event. I use them. Some experiences seem to involve more than observation, and the body becomes the tool and support."

"It sounds almost... primal."

She ignored me, "With the body and the written down words I have a possibility to remember something. At the same time,"

I interrupted her,

"How do we know that you won't forget this thing and end up making a painting, not a painting of a memory, reaching beyond what you know about the situation?"

7 "It's the trouble of experiencing an idea or thought in the shape words take. I find ideas quite disturbing, I

don't know how to paint them, yet they seem necessary to get to paint. I experience, or maybe I think about, the process as a multilayered one, of back and forth translation and the joy of getting lost and present in that space. You kind of get washed over with the things that are surrounding you, they and you are picked up by the tide of circumstance and that is the painting.

Recently I have experienced a direct connection between encounters and images – to the point that, the physically felt event, is pierced with a clear ideation of a painting. I have felt a range of charged, complex responses; unease, disgust, distress, arousal, and these feelings can reverberate over time, changing and even distancing themselves from the actual encounter so I am only left with the pliant memory of the emotion. And though most of them didn't actually turn into a painting they sure fed into the work.”

“Which work? Your work for us or your artwork?”

She ignored me again.

*But this is not the end for the cursed patches...like rare objects and swinging necklace...an albatross.. singed and greasy...this leader must be killed...making contact with some new space age material...and you do kill it.... walking back a few steps to see what has happened.... they follow the eel..*

Sometimes I lost myself so completely in our conversations that when I read back through my notes that I am not

sure which one of us is speaking.

“It’s hard to explain specifically but there are feelings here, undercurrents. I get a sense of things?”

“What kind of things?”

“Things between the written and the spoken,”

“I think I understand what you mean. I like what you say about it being between spoken and written language, like a third form, but one that we can’t talk about using, the same language with which we might compare the spoken or written language, how grammar is different in those two forms.”

“This is exactly what I mean sometimes we think in words, in stories, even in storylines. And I think that the word line might be an important one here: different lines of thought, but filtered and brought together in our heads. Well, mostly I can only speak for myself here. One line for words, another one for these other elements that you speak of, images, sounds, smell and so on... They will run simultaneously, but can be edited individually.”

“Maybe painting is more within life.”

“I do believe that painting is within life, the act of painting, that is. Looking at it too, but that’s actually closer to writing or even reading.”

“Hold that thought.”

“It’s complete nonsense, I know.”

“I’ve done nothing quickly to be honest.”

*They are an antidote...flying papers...they are leftovers...a simpler sensation...they loop...buttons...invocations...sigils...loaded...the supernatural...the visible*

In one session we read the notes of one of her operatives, Angelico, the ciphers our enemies were using and his attempts to decode them:

Sink Friendship  
RKV  
Children's Section  
Around the Lake  
Exit  
Hot Foggy Mess  
Pen  
shout / street / supermarket / bike  
Horns and Claws and Cloak

She looked at me as we came to the end of this list,

“This is one of the beautiful things about reading, and the potential to make paintings about writing—the endless intricacies of language make interpretations intimate and personal and we take a sensation, a sliver and make something from it that is intuitive and one’s own.”

“Do you try and paint the way that books make you feel?”

“I experience the same undulating movement when painting as when I am reading; a muted gradual development of a plot versus the sharp turn of events is like digesting the appearance of a painting while waiting for the paint to dry versus a quick brush stroke



that spontaneously formulates a shape on a canvas.

There are slight fundamental differences though; reading is about unfolding and re-living the moment, whereas painting is about creating the moment and responding to it at the same time. A constellation that sort of bleeds into one another enough, with every painting a stepping stone to the next, just far enough away not to repeat but close enough to make the step.

But the hand will always be slower than the mind. When I paint about writing, which is roughly every time I paint, I search for what we could call graphical solutions for words. How can I tell you the way that person felt when they told me what they did?”

Cave dripping  
Flat Bread  
Roma  
End of World  
Stones / Slope  
Docile Zombie Scouts  
dipping / dunking  
hand on chest  
Estate Agent Sex Slippers

And, of course, she had made copious notes herself.

“Words belong to something else, I borrow them to write. Words come from the same place as hands come from. They press and hack, like tools, always short,

//

sharp movements. I write in stunted lines, and join them up. Words, writing, fiction, they are built by one another, like verse, chapter, book. I cannot see them in any other way, they all break down to the same value as material.

And they must be physical materials which I can dilute into feelings. There are words that belong to me and there are all the other words.”

*The smell of a Gold pen... The first one I'd have to ask for, I don't have it around any more... borrow from other fields... an ambivalent relationship to repetition... reach for other systems that are somewhat also endogenous... which is hilarious*

Sometimes I would imagine that actually I was painting a portrait of her, chimeric and transcendent. It would give me the opportunity to handle her story with a softer grip, to think about her hallucinations and satirical humour with lightness, nodding toward her without the pressure of embodying her, of transcribing her for my employers.

I imagined her as a Polycephalus, the six heads swooping and circling in front of me, in constant search for equilibrium, like a cloud of starlings flocking in flight, ducking and weaving, like the tendrils of a sea anemone wriggling in the current. Sometimes I'd imagined these heads masked, arguing with one another, about painting, about writing, about spying.

*Big Head Little Face..grabbing and snapping, savagely timed and viciously quick....I really like them, I'd like something with their flying capabilities...you never drink them..watch from the perimeter...innumerable and elastic..sensation and reflection...pinching the skin of the rabbit for control...attached to the temples of moving information...a huge chunk of head in fact...like an appendix.*

“How aware are you of what you are doing when working?”

“As I work I try to observe and document the steps I take in the work itself and in a notebook, it is an intuitive and simple process. I'm not cutting out the fun and I plan much more than usual, but do it as I go along. I find methods / signs to know what is what that I can read and track back the steps I took, as there are many similarities going on. I feel a little weird about it and besides enjoying it I keep asking why I am doing this.

The letters and letters I posted are part of it and the big fleshy canvas as well. I'm not even sure what that is, but it is a spreading of words and phrases and an attempt to find an appropriate space for them, not a system, but a place of belonging.

I find that in fiction you can change things so quickly, you don't have to justify as much. It's written down somewhere.”

“This fictionalising of lives; is this what painting does, is this why we like it?”

“Sorry, I’ve not been listening to you. I’ve been captivated by myself, by not being able to figure out if my paintings tell a story or not.”

“What has happened to your operatives?”

“Your operatives, you mean,”

I didn’t respond to this so she continued, but angrier

“Flatly, they are the ignored, forgotten, blown into the silvery metallic night-time abyss that the grubby studio floor occupies in the day. They slip and wiggle into the shimmering mercury underworld where they wait for you to invoke them. You never renew them, they just keep, unquestioned and unnoticed, predestined to become displaced, tied up, and to mingle with everything else.”

I changed the subject, used her speech to question her about the studio which I had become increasingly fascinated by, saw it as fundamental to our work. I rolled my finger in a circle as I asked,

“What about this space?”

“The studio collects habits, so do paintings. They are steeped in them. Habits for me are what bonds painting and words, and words and painting; it’s a reciprocal thing for sure. And painting is just a part, or sub-section of thinking, a kind of ‘plug-in’, or tributary that runs alongside a larger river.

I hardly ever sit on the edge of beds any more, yet I do

sit (and lie) on my studio floor for hours. I've exchanged the location but not the activity. This is why the studio is so important to me, it is a place that holds a concern for all those other lives, places, types of violence, sadness, and fulfilment."

Pacified, she then asked me a question;

"I'd like to read your notes; what you write is very relevant to me, how you are forming the correlation between conversation, fiction & painting will provide really rich ground,"

"Maybe," I answered, uncertain now in her presence.

But the last time I saw her I asked her if I could have one of her works and we swapped a copy of my notes for a painting she had done of the night water.

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Though I am listed as the sole author of the text, it would be more accurately described as a collective piece of writing as it came from months of interviews with five other artists; namely Christiane Bergelt, Olarn Chiaravanont, Rasmus Nilausen, Catherine Parsonage and Ross Taylor, on the subject of writing and painting. Some of their responses have been pasted more or less verbatim into this narrative so it is no exaggeration to say that without them this narrative wouldn't exist, and my role has been as much editor as storyteller.

Michael Lawton

This edition was laid out with the help of Ariadna Guiteras,  
Barcelona, January 2018





**MORTA DELLA**

**MICHAEL LAWTON**



# MORTA DELLA

















When Arabella Carter was very young she was already the best in the town at naming things.

*Shilick* she said, four years old and pointing at the damp grass that seemed always damp, drooping like towel-dried hair toward the cracks in the pavement, and soon everyone in our constituency was calling it Shilick Grass.

She was 21 when she named the blue-black birds that feed on the Shilick, *Torozens*. It was actually because of their habitat of eating facing the horizon, she told me one day in my studio, that her inspiration for their name came from. But to those that didn't know it, there was simply some Torozen-ness about these birds and their patient stance, some Torozen-ness about the Torozens that we were now all aware of.

She called the fall you have as you are dropping off to sleep, the *Thistimble*

She called the moment of being frozen with fear when you wake from a nightmare *Garllantheon*

She called the sensation on the tongue as it sucks back between the pebbles, *Shishingle*

It was impossible not to see our constituency, our world, through her words, from the *Bartomollotas* grazing in our fields to the *Palmillo* tree, the fruits of which, the *Palmilla*, we eat every summer.

Chips of paint she called *Tecks*

The unsure footing of shoes on artificial turf she called *Fwooth*

The tearing of one's jealous heart she called *Wriwrac*

She named all our colours. When I travelled, I realised that we don't all think colours the same way; the painter might think in terms of weight, the cook might give colours flavours, the iconoclast, fury, but in our town we had all

learnt to think of colours as Arabella did. *Diozomi* was the blue of the evening sky in April, *Pulmaca* the purple of Bartomollota shit. The colour of the blood of the trees she called *Dinzengent*, and then we would call anything else of that tawny red Dinzengent, and we also used it as an adjective to describe fertility and harvest time. Her words were fuzzed sometimes through our usage but they still had their roots in her.

The ink stains she got on her fingers after writing she called *Falruises* and all of us called the ink stains we got on our fingers after writing Falruises.

The sucking wince she made when her mother applied iodine to her scraped knees she called *Cha* and then all of us called the sucking wince we made when our mother applied iodine to our scraped knees Cha.

The mild flashbacks to hallucinations that we neither blissful nor terrifying, she called *Polzetos* and all of us called the mild flashbacks to hallucinations that we neither blissful nor terrifying, Polzetos.

This skill of appositeness of description, this appropriateness of her word skills, resulted in many of her neighbours, my countrymen, applying to her advice on other matters. At first she'd respond, flattered and demure; demurring "I am a poet not a doctor" or "I am a poet not a sorceress." And it is true that back then she was more reticent about naming for others, about giving out advice, about settling disputes, about rebranding the rundown.

"What of the old names?" she said, "what will become of them?"

There was some truth in this. Some of the creatures lost their edges after being embraced by her vocabulary, lost that which wasn't captured by her names: The feathers of the *Kooxans* lost their eyes, or these eyes lost the ability of sight anyway, became nothing more than glassy lolling spheres; delicious when fried, crispy on the outside, runny inside. After all it was also true that the Kooxans were a lot easier to catch once their panoptic vision had gone.

Sometimes she would suggest names for children of kin; she told me what I would name my daughter, and I did, but she went no further than that in her advices.

We all see the world through our own eyes. But I remember thinking that for her it must have been different. The world came to meet her eyes, it must have felt to her that the world almost wanted to be seen the way she saw it. Unlike me she never left, and her words became embedded in everything, little by little she bleached all her surroundings until her world was as she wished it.

I don't know if this is why, but at some point she changed her mind on offering advice, on getting involved in the lives of others, perhaps she wanted their worlds to look more like hers. At this point I was travelling outside the city at the end of my youth, on national service, but before I left word of her ability was spreading beyond our constituency, this would have been the end of her youth too. When I returned not only was she dispensing advice more readily, she had also made some powerful friends.

I can't really dilk or complain; I took her moffer too when she was in my studio that day she bought a painting I'd made of the moon. She told me I should only make paintings of the moon, and I did, and made my name as an artist.

She came to know a businessman TH Lavinder and with her help, naming each of his franchises differently, he became very rich. He seemed to have amassed his fortune whilst I was away, there was a park that was renamed Lavindery before I left, because of the lavender that grew there, or so Arabella said. Whilst I was away Lavinder had taken ownership of it, it was in his name after all, and he levelled the park and built flats, expanding into property.

When TH Lavinder decided he wanted to run for mayor, Arabella was involved in his electioneering; everyone said that it was her naming his particular solution for austerity, of radical wealth redistribution, as *Remuner & Renumer* that was the reason for its popularity.

During his candidacy she helped exposed the nepotism that the incumbent mayor profited from by naming it *Chachality*. Until it was named we weren't able to see how septic, rife and damaging it was, both to democracy and how we were perceived outside of our country. As the bodies of the now former mayor and his deputy were left in a tank in the main square she called the process of putrefaction of the bodies of your rivals *Sanstein*.

The aqueduct that marked the beginning of Lavinder's ambitions for expansion, she called *Forevet*. The water that flooded the fields after the rains, diverted there by Forevet, she called *Tillender*. Dizengent was buxful because of Tillender for a whole vicade and the city got wealthier and wealthier.

Soon more and more of her words had entered our vocabulary. Was she speaking for Lavinder or he for her? When he came onto the delepatheron and said Asturton! Asturton Piatges! We weren't really that surprised.

When we went to war she called the machines, our soldiers rode off in *Coupaers*, and she blessed them.

She called the blood of our enemies, *Dismalaplay*

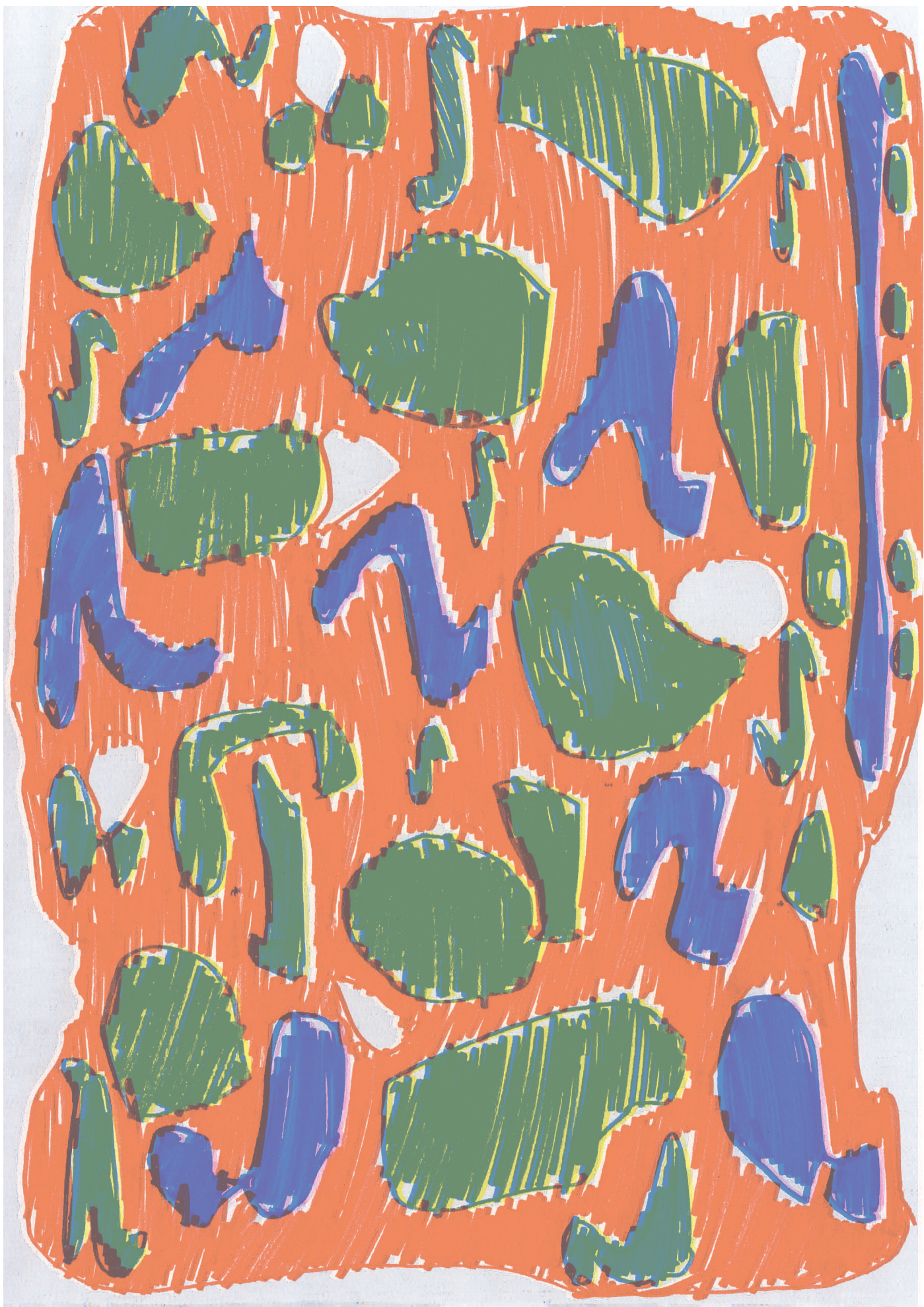
The children of our enemies, *Jattle*

The name of their land, *Dogerer*

















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