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Graley Herren
Xavier University

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Ekphrasis

Graley Herren

Don DeLillo is a word-painter. This is not merely a generic label touting his skill for visualisation as a writer, but rather a specific identification of his fundamental approach as an artist. He declared as much in his seminal interview with Thomas LeClair. Responding to LeClair's question about spatial analysis in his work, DeLillo explained:

> It's a way to take psychology out of a character's mind and into the room he occupies. I try to examine psychological states by looking at people in rooms, objects in rooms. It's a way of saying we can know something important about a character by the way he sees himself in relation to objects. People in rooms have always seemed important to me. I don't know why or ask myself why, but sometimes I feel I'm *painting* a character in a room, and the most important thing I can do is set him up in relation to objects, shadows, angles. (LeClair 14)

Students and scholars of DeLillo's work have probably encountered this passage before, maybe once too often, so that we might forget to pay close attention to what the artist is saying here. But slow down and look again, because it is tremendously revealing. DeLillo gets *inside* his character's mind from the *outside*. He envisions a figure in a room. He sees that figure in relation to objects in that room; indeed, at the initial stage, the figure is essentially just another object. Through careful observation and contemplation, however, DeLillo begins to fathom certain inner depths by examining how that figure sees himself or herself in relation to those other objects. In this way, the flat figure, all surface at first, gradually accrues layers and volume – in short, the object acquires subjectivity. By describing what and how the figure sees, by considering why these objects matter to the emergent subject, by tracing the evolution of the subject's relation to these objects as time passes and contexts change, and by capturing this nexus of visual relations and perceptions through language – this is how a word-painter creates art.

Although DeLillo is unusually adept at producing this sort of art, he did not invent the technique. In fact, dating back to classical antiquity and continuing through the present, there is a vibrant tradition of literature constructed according to these principles: *ekphrasis*. The most succinct and widely cited definition is offered by James Heffernan: 'ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation' (3). Words about images. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the job of the ekphrastic writer is secondary and derivative, verbally describing a pre-existing visual image. On the contrary, the best ekphrasis involves deep meditation, focusing at least as much on

the subject gazing as on the object gazed upon. As Renate Brosch observes, ekphrasis typically involves

> inserting an emotionally affected observer confronted with sparse but carefully selected details, which serve as building blocks for a personal vision. Most ekphrastic passages do not tell us so much what an image looks like exactly as describe its affective impact in order to provide tinted lenses that may color our own visualization of it. (238)

The image that matters most in ekphrasis is not the one viewed externally but the one reconstituted by the observer internally.

Ekphrasis often stages conflict. In drawing attention to differences between verbal and visual expression, such writing tends to expose underlying tensions between competing signifying systems. Stephen Cheeke notes, 'The history of ekphrasis as a literary mode and practice is intimately bound up with the body of thought and theory upon the broader relation of the sister arts' (20). Beginning with Plutarch's famous assertion that 'painting is mute poetry and poetry speaking picture', Cheeke chronicles a tradition locked in artistic competition. Ekphrasis animates a struggle between words and images over

> what each art *lacks* in relation to the other: the silence of paintings (or as 'mute' suggests, the inability of paintings to speak, which is not the same as a refusal to speak); and the pictorialism of poetry: the way poetic language may strive to produce pictures or images for the mind's eye. (21)

Cheeke goes on to add that,

> as a means of investigating the nature of each art through thinking about what they *cannot* do, and through assuming that each art is therefore driven by a *desire* to do what it cannot do, as if the nature of the rivalry were a means of illumination, this debate has proved extraordinarily fertile. And the notion of a *paragone*, a struggle, a contest, a confrontation, remains central to all thinking about ekphrasis. (21)

This conflict is often gendered. In traditional ekphrasis, a male writer gazes at a still and silent female figure, or an object that has been feminised and eroticised. The writer attempts to speak for the image, but the image often resists or frustrates his efforts. Heffernan observes,

> Ekphrasis speaks not only *about* works of art but also *to* and *for* them. In so doing, it stages – within the theater of language itself – a revolution of the image against the word, and particularly the word of Lessing, who decreed that the duty of pictures was to be silent and beautiful (like a woman), leaving expression to poetry. In talking back and looking back at the male viewer, the images envoiced by ekphrasis challenge at once the controlling authority of the male gaze and the power of the male word. (7)

The classic example of ekphrasis as a gendered conflict is John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. The poet frames his encounter in terms of erotic pursuit from the start, addressing

the urn as 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time' (Keats 223). Like the two lovers painted on the side, the man in pursuit of the woman, the poet's relationship with the urn is one of seduction. As Grant F. Scott puts it, the urn 'serves as an irresistible challenge to the speaker. He will ravish it with his gaze, unlock the mysteries that have stymied so many before him. A modern day Perseus, he will skillfully capture the urn/Medusa and convert her into his own specialized masculine discourse of language' (139). At least that is his goal. By the end of the poem, however, the only words the poet manages to ventriloquise through the urn are these closing lines: '"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"' (Keats 223). Some readers find this dictum to be wise and poignant, but for others it reads like a tautological dismissal, as if to say, 'You know what you know – now leave me alone.' As W. J. T. Mitchell wryly observes, 'If the poet is going to make the mute, feminized art object speak, he could at least give her something interesting to say' (171).

DeLillo frequently incorporates ekphrasis into his fiction. These interactions between the verbal and the visual sometimes replicate the dominant tradition outlined above, and at other times resist or subvert the tradition in interesting ways. There are dozens of examples of ekphrasis spanning throughout DeLillo's career, so an exhaustive treatment lies beyond the scope of the present chapter. Instead, this essay will selectively focus on three novels from three different decades: *Mao II* (1991), *Falling Man* (2007) and *Zero K* (2016). Not only is ekphrasis pervasive and crucially important in each of these novels, but all three also feature prototypical replicas of the ur-scene where DeLillo gazes at a subject in relation to objects in a room.

Mao II

DeLillo has included thoughtful engagements with other artworks ever since his first novel *Americana* (1971), but *Mao II* represents a quantum leap forward in his ekphrasis. The novel is named after a piece by Andy Warhol, whose colourful renderings of Chairman Mao adorn the book's front cover. Between the covers, the novel incorporates five photos, as well as a number of ekphrastic narrative passages. DeLillo told interviewer Vince Passaro that his inspiration for *Mao II* came from two photos in particular. One was from a mass wedding conducted by Reverend Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church; the other was captured by an unscrupulous photographer who ambushed the self-exiled writer J. D. Salinger and published the photo against his will. According to DeLillo, 'I didn't know it at the time, but these two pictures would represent the polar extremes of *Mao II*, the arch individualist and the mass mind' (Passaro 81). Reflecting upon the first of these images, he recalled, 'I realized I wanted to understand this event, and the only way to understand it was to write about it. For me, writing is a concentrated form of thinking' (Passaro 80). What DeLillo describes here are the basic ingredients for ekphrasis: a writer is drawn to an image, contemplates it deeply, and then thinks meticulously and reflexively in words about the effect the image has upon the observer-writer.

There are several noteworthy ekphrastic passages in *Mao II*, but the one that best encapsulates DeLillo's assiduous yet transgressive approach to the tradition appears in the photo shoot scene. Bill Gray is a notoriously reclusive writer who has hidden away from the public spotlight for over twenty years while working on an unwieldy novel. He invites Brita Nilsson, a Swedish photographer who specialises exclusively in

portraits of writers, to visit his hideaway and take his picture. The third chapter of the novel depicts the photo shoot and culminates with this ekphrastic description of the most striking image from the session:

> She watched him surrender his crisp gaze to a softening, a bright-eyed fear that seemed to funnel out of childhood. It had the starkness of a last prayer. She worked to get at it. His face was drained and slack, coming into flatness, into black and white, cracked lips and flaring brows, age lines that hinge the chin, old bafflements and regrets. She moved in closer and refocused, she shot and shot, and he stood there looking into the lens, soft eyes shining. (*Mao II* 49)

Bill comes across here like a deer caught in the headlights, or in the scope of the hunter's gun. Indeed, when DeLillo published this excerpted chapter as a short story in *Esquire*, he gave it the predatory title 'Shooting Bill Gray'.

DeLillo adopts the familiar setup of ekphrasis but conspicuously reverses the usual gender roles by portraying a woman sizing up and objectifying a man through her predatory gaze. Not that Brita is an unsympathetic character; in fact, she and Bill are well matched and strike up an instant rapport. Nevertheless, they both recognise that the image-maker, not the wordsmith, is calling the shots in this situation. When first describing her project to Bill's assistant Scott, Brita sounds like a big game tracker on safari: '"I will just keep on photographing writers, every one I can reach, novelists, poets, playwrights. I am on the prowl, so to speak. I never stop traveling and taking pictures. This is what I do now. Writers"' (25). Bill would be her biggest trophy yet: she knows it, and he knows it, too. The scales of power and possession are tilted to Brita's advantage. Sitting for his portrait, Bill muses,

> 'We're alone in a room involved in this mysterious exchange. What am I giving up to you? And what are you investing me with, or stealing from me? How are you changing me? I can feel the change like some current just under the skin. Are you making me up as you go along? Am I mimicking myself? And when did women start photographing in the first place? [. . .] I've become someone's material. Yours, Brita.' (43)

Interestingly, DeLillo responded in similar fashion when he sat for an interview with Maria Nadotti: 'When is it that women began to photograph men? [. . .] And was it important? In short, did the world change when women began watching men, becoming spectators rather than objects?' (Nadotti 112) Answering his own questions, he added,

> I think that the basic thing is that women have begun to put their eyes behind cameras. Whatever is on the other side that becomes the object will now be seen in a different way from the way it would be seen otherwise, especially if the object on the other side of the view finder is a man. (Nadotti 113)

DeLillo embeds this gendered perception into the ekphrasis of the photo shoot scene.

Brita is wholly in charge of the shoot. She chooses the lenses, adjusts the lights, determines the angles and moves Bill's head to achieve the aesthetic effects she desires.

In this re-enactment of DeLillo's prototypical scene, with objects placed in revelatory relation inside a room, Brita is the director, set designer and choreographer. This is an exercise in power, but it is also a performance. DeLillo concludes the chapter with an ekphrastic description of a striking *tableau*, but he also dramatises the *vivant* process through which that image was staged. The third chapter of *Mao II* captures the flux, contingency, collaboration, resistance, artifice and serendipity that go into creating and mediating art.

Not only is Brita in control of the visual stagecraft of this dynamic process, but she is also the controlling narrative consciousness of the chapter. The photo shoot is dominated by dialogue, and Bill can certainly punch his weight when it comes to verbal sparring. However, it seems extremely telling that, when it comes to the narrative passages inserted among the dialogue, *all* are told from Brita's perspective and *none* from Bill's. The reader has privileged access to Brita's private inner thoughts in this chapter, but we only know Bill from the outside, through what he says and how he looks. Brita alone is granted full agency. Granted, Bill speaks his mind at length. But what he verbalises are primarily pronouncements about his dwindling potency, eroding relevance and pending demise. At one point he morosely observes, '"Something about the occasion makes me think I'm at my own wake. Sitting for a picture is morbid business. A portrait doesn't begin to mean anything until the subject is dead [. . .] It's like a wake. And I'm the actor made up for the laying-out"' (*Mao II* 42). His observations jibe with Susan Sontag's about the elegiac nature of photography: 'All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (Sontag 15). As Bill talks away during the photo shoot, it is as though he is haemorrhaging words, being steadily drained of subjectivity, before finally being stuffed and mounted on the wall. He is not the subject of the photo shoot, he is the object, both visually and narratively.

Bill believes that his whole profession is in its death throes. He worries that novelists are losing a zero-sum contest against terrorists, and *Mao II* lends credence to those concerns. By the end of the novel, the Salingeresque champion of the individual and the novel's 'democratic shout' (*Mao II* 159) is dead, and Brita has shifted her focus from photographing writers to photographing terrorist leaders. When we finally meet Abu Rashid, he demonstrates certain unexpected similarities to Bill, hounded by his own set of doubts and insecurities. Brita gets the better of her exchange with both men, and both photo shoots are narrated entirely from her perspective. The most quoted line from *Mao II* is 'The future belongs to crowds' (16), but that is not the only thesis of the novel: the future also belongs to images.

At least that's what the novel shows. However, there is serious friction between content and form in the ekphrasis of *Mao II*. The novel appears to herald the imminent defeat of words and the triumph of images, but the medium undermines that message. Brita the image-maker may prevail against Bill the book-maker and Abu Rashid the bomb-maker, but all three are contained within a work of art by DeLillo the word-painter. The novel's ekphrastic interventions are innovative and subversive. DeLillo thrives where his characters flounder, not in spite of the proliferating image industry but through it: if you can't beat them, appropriate them. *Mao II* is simultaneously an obituary for the fallen novel and a counterstrike in its defence.

Falling Man

When militant jihadists hijacked aeroplanes and crashed two of them into the World Trade Center towers on 11 September 2001, these attacks marked a major milestone in the ascent of global terrorism. In his essay for *Harper's* published in December 2001, ominously titled 'In the Ruins of the Future', DeLillo conceded, 'Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists' (33). He envisioned a crucial role for writers in responding to these acts of terror: 'The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative' (34). The challenge for the writer, and also the moral responsibility, would be to confront what happened in the towers on 9/11, gaze into that human terror, contemplate it deeply, penetrate the experience and/or be penetrated by it, and then reconstruct a counternarrative. 'We have to take the shock and horror as it is', DeLillo asserted. 'But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us' (39). DeLillo takes up this challenge and fulfils this responsibility in *Falling Man*, where ekphrasis proves the ideal technique for gazing into 9/11 and trying to understand what it did to us.

The central characters of *Falling Man* are spouses Keith Neudecker and Lianne Glenn. The estranged couple briefly reunite after dust-covered, glassy-eyed Keith shows up on Lianne's doorstep on 9/11, having narrowly escaped death in the WTC tower where he worked. The beginning and end of the novel reconstruct Keith's sensory impressions in the minutes after the plane's impact. These scenes are harrowing, but they take us only so far. Access is limited because, as the experience unfolds, Keith finds it impossible to assimilate what is happening. In the days, weeks and eventually years after 9/11, access remains blocked because Keith suffers acutely from post-traumatic symptoms and avoids those memories. Since the main character who was actually there is so unwilling or unable to confront what happened, *Falling Man*'s counternarrative depends upon Lianne to find an alternate route into 9/11. Like DeLillo, and like almost everyone impacted by the 9/11 attacks, Lianne was not in the towers that day. Nonetheless, she feels compelled to enter into the experience and be entered by it, if only through indirect, occluded, deflected and speculative means. Ekphrasis provides Lianne, DeLillo and his readers with this necessary inroad to 9/11.

Lianne's ekphrastic engagements in *Falling Man* fall into two categories of starkly different register: responses to the so-called 'jumpers' who leaped from the towers to their deaths rather than be burned alive; and responses to the still-life paintings of Giorgio Morandi. Although Linda Kauffman does not examine the novel in terms of ekphrasis per se, she does make telling connections between Lianne and that ekphrastic exemplar John Keats by way of negative capability,

> the ability to enter imaginatively into the subjectivity of another person or thing. As Keats describes it, his own personality disappears in the process of imagining the Grecian urn or the nightingale. Lianne possesses this quality: ever since she was a little girl, she has imaginatively absorbed the sensations around her, as if her body were a permeable membrane. (Kauffman 136)

Lianne's propensity for imaginative absorption is epitomised by her response to footage of the second plane crashing into south tower:

> Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone's, into some other distance, out beyond the towers. (*Falling Man* 134)

DeLillo writes against the grain of typical ekphrasis by once again featuring a woman as the subject gazing rather than the object gazed upon. That said, the ekphrastic description of 'the footage that entered the body' has unmistakable sexual connotations, and in this respect replicates the familiar pattern of woman as vessel to be filled, bride to be ravished, or membrane to be permeated. For a reader familiar with DeLillo's fiction, one hears echoes of the satirical scene from *White Noise* where Jack and Babette use erotic literature as foreplay. Babette draws the line at lame descriptions of sex in terms of 'entering': '"Enter me, enter me, yes, yes"' (*White Noise* 29). That line is crossed in *Falling Man*, however, when the video footage of 9/11 enters Lianne like a sordid simulation of the planes penetrating the towers.

The novel's title contains multiple frames of reference and levels of representation. First there is the 'jumper' (later identified as Eric Briley), one of the estimated two hundred people who leaped from the burning towers on 9/11. This particular suicide became emblematic by way of a famous photo labelled 'The Falling Man', shot by Richard Drew and disseminated by many news outlets before being quickly suppressed as too disturbing and/or exploitative. Then there is DeLillo's fictional performance artist known as the Falling Man (a character later identified as David Janiak). This performer periodically appears unannounced at locations across New York City and re-enacts the leap and pose of the suicide captured in Drew's iconic image. Finally, if only metaphorically, there is Keith as a falling man, one who survived the attacks on 9/11 but who subsequently plummets in a slow-motion descent towards equally assured self-destruction.

Lianne responds through ekphrasis to various images of these falling men. She recalls her initial reaction to Drew's notorious photo in ekphrastic detail:

> It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. The man headlong, the towers behind him. The mass of the towers filled the frame of the picture. The man falling, the towers contiguous, she thought, behind him. The enormous soaring lines, the vertical column stripes. The man with blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks, and the effect of the columns behind him, the composition, she thought, darker stripes for the nearer tower, the north, lighter for the other, and the mass, the immensity of it, and the man set almost precisely between the rows of darker and lighter stripes. Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. (*Falling Man* 221–2)

Lianne grieves the suicide, but her response chiefly entails aesthetic appreciation for the beautiful visual composition. Because she cannot get inside this falling man's subjectivity, she is left to consider the image from the outside like an art object. She admires what she sees, but she is denied admission to the depths of experience and the terrible truths concealed behind the glossy surface. If 'The Falling Man' photo

could speak, that foster-child of silence and slow time might say, 'Terror is truth, truth terror, – that is all / You know about 9/11, and all you need to know.'

Lianne's responses to the performance artist the Falling Man are subtly but importantly different. Like Lianne, David Janiak confronts 9/11 from the outside and at a distance in time and space. Although her horror at these performances resembles her reaction to Drew's photo, Lianne can identify with the performer in a way she could not with the jumper and his image. Lianne and Janiak are equidistant from the scene of the crime and the site of trauma. If Briley falls along the axis mundi of Ground Zero and Drew's photo is surveyed from Ground Minus-One, then Janiak and Lianne both occupy Ground Minus-Two. From this remove, neither the performer nor the gazer can pierce the membrane of alterity and subjectivity to get inside the jumper's experience. Instead, through the transformative alchemy of their separate perceptions, they appropriate 'The Falling Man' as, respectively, a stage on which to re-enact trauma and a screen on which to project preoccupations with death.

The first time Lianne sees Janiak's performance, she observes, 'There was a blankness in his face, but deep, a kind of lost gaze. Because what was he doing finally? Because did he finally know? She thought the bare space he stared into must be his own, not some grim vision of others falling' (167). Lianne makes this bare space her own, too, a tabula rasa on which she inscribes her worries over traumatised Keith: 'But why was she standing here watching? Because she saw her husband somewhere near [. . .] Because she felt compelled, or only helpless' (167). She feels obliged to gaze at the Falling Man and to contemplate the jumper's unfathomable experience. This is her civic responsibility, but more personally it is a debt she feels she owes to Keith.

Lianne thinks she is honouring her husband through this post-9/11 vigil, but her response to the Falling Man is also wrapped up in unresolved feelings about her father. As she watches a second performance by Janiak, 'She thought, Died by his own hand' (169). This is a phrase linked in her mind with Jack Glenn's suicide. Lianne's father shot himself during the early stages of dementia, preferring suicide to the worse fate of completely losing control of his life and becoming a stranger to those he loved. It is not merely that one image of suicide triggers associations with another. What binds the Falling Man so closely to Jack's death is the comparable calculus involved. Both the jumpers and her father looked at the situation, confronted the hard facts, gamed out the deadly scenarios, and chose a quick and comparatively painless death to a death involving greater suffering. The plane entered the tower and the bullet entered Jack's brain: the results were immediate death for some and lingering devastation for the survivors, on both global and individual scales. Lianne's ekphrastic engagements with various falling men functions as a process for better assimilating her own traumas.

A similar yet distinct function is served by Lianne's ekphrastic encounters with Giorgio Morandi's still-life paintings. Her mother, Nina Bartos, is a retired art professor and collector. Lianne has long been enamoured with two Morandi paintings hanging in Nina's apartment:

> What she loved most were the two still lifes on the north wall, by Giorgio Morandi, a painter her mother had studied and written about. These were groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins, that was all, but there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name, or in the irregular edges of vases and jars, some reconnoiter inward, human and obscure, away from the very light and color of the paintings. *Natura morta*. The Italian term for still life seemed stronger than it had to be, somewhat ominous, even, but these were matters she hadn't talked about with her mother. (12)

DeLillo again arranges a gender-reversed reprise of classic ekphrasis, here with a woman gazing intently at images wrought by a man, though the objects themselves (bottles, jugs, biscuit tins) are vessels that retain feminine signification, like Keats's urn. In her initial response above, Lianne is content to let Morandi's containers remain empty. She resists interpretation, insisting 'Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment' (12).

She lifts her moratorium on imposing meaning in the wake of 9/11. Soon after the attacks, Martin Ridnour (aka Ernst Hechinger), a German art dealer and Nina's long-time lover, declares, '"I keep seeing the towers in this still life"' (49). Lianne looks again and agrees:

> Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to [. . .] She saw what he saw. She saw the towers. (49)

But Nina disagrees:

> 'These shapes are not translatable to modern towers, twin towers. It's work that rejects that kind of extension or projection. It takes you inward, down and in. That's what I see there, half buried, something deeper than things or shapes of things [. . .] It's all about mortality, isn't it?' (111)

At first it may seem that the professor emerita contradicts herself. Nina claims that Morandi's *Natura morta* rejects projection, and then she proceeds to project meaning: it's all about mortality. However, the key link is her middle assertion about the paintings guiding the observer *inward*, not into the painting but into the self. Yes, when Nina looks at the Morandi still life she sees death; but she recognises that this harbinger is not contained in the image but rather within herself as viewer. His bottles, jugs and biscuit tins refuse to be pried open, but this does not shut off the artistic circuitry. Instead, contemplation of the *Natura morta* leads Nina to gaze within, and what she confronts there is her own encroaching death.

Art = the object itself + the observer's subjective response + context + time. In one sense, Morandi's still-life renderings of humble domestic items, or the pastoral figures painted on the sides of Keats's urn, are permanently fixed and unchanging. In another sense, however, every observer encounters a different work of art based upon what each brings to the encounter. Furthermore, shifting contexts in space and time may alter one's view, so that a painting that seemed to signify one thing on 10 September is transformed into something remarkably different on 12 September. Lianne communicates the mutability of art through her later ekphrastic engagement with Morandi's paintings in 2004, after her mother's death. Walking through an exhibition, she is struck by one still life in particular:

> She looked at the third painting for a long time. It was a variation on one of the paintings her mother had owned. She noted the nature and shape of each object, the placement of objects, the tall dark oblongs, the white bottle. She could not stop

> looking. There was something hidden in the painting. Nina's living room was there, memory and motion. The objects in the painting faded into the figures behind them, the woman smoking in the chair, the standing man. (210)

Exiting the gallery, she muses, 'All the paintings and drawings carried the same title, *Natura Morta*. Even this, the term for still life, yielded her mother's last days' (211). Lianne has come around to sharing Nina's view that these paintings are all about mortality, specifically her mother's mortality. However, the two women gazers still see art in fundamentally different ways. Nina looks for meaning within herself, while Lianne still projects her meaning on to or into the artwork. Lianne begins with an ekphrastic description of the *Natura morta* in front of her. In the aftermath of 9/11 Lianne projected images of the twin towers on to the canvas, and in the aftermath of her mother's death she projects recollections of her mother. But then her focus shifts from Morandi's painting to a correspondent counter-image of her own creation, a still life housed in her memory. The two images become indistinguishable and interchangeable for her. As Lianne stands before the painting in 2004, she is transported back to 2001, when she, Nina and Martin were all together observing, reflecting and commenting upon Morandi:

> The two dark objects, the white bottle, the huddled boxes. Lianne turned away from the painting and saw the room itself as a still life, briefly. Then the human figures appear, Mother and Lover, with Nina still in the armchair, thinking remotely of something, and Martin hunched on the sofa now, facing her. (111)

She superimposes this memory on to the canvas: the two dark objects represent Nina and Martin, and the white bottle is Lianne. This self-reflexive imagery works like a hall of mirrors: Morandi's material still life of bottles, jugs and biscuit tins is reflected in Lianne's mental still life of Mother, Lover and Daughter, which in turn replicates DeLillo's ur-scene of objects in relation to one another in a room. All of these visual representations of trauma and mortality, and the matrix of gazes through which they are perceived, performed, rearranged and reconstituted, are etched verbally on the page and incorporated into the word-painting *Falling Man*.

Zero K

Zero K is relentlessly ekphrastic. Scarcely a chapter goes by without one or more detailed encounters with art or aestheticised objects told from the perspective of first-person narrator Jeffrey Lockhart. For a novel ostensibly about cryogenics, it is striking how much emphasis DeLillo places upon art. The Convergence essentially doubles as both cryogenics facility and avant-garde museum. Jeff's stepmother Artis, preparing to be frozen alongside his father Ross, describes the Convergence as one giant work of art: '"We ought to regard it as a work-in-progress, an earthwork, a form of earth art, land art. Built up out of the land and sunk down into it as well. Restricted access. Defined by stillness, both human and environmental. A little tomblike as well"' (*Zero K* 10). Jeff picks up on this theme when he describes 'the sense of enclosure and isolation, a new generation of earth art, with human bodies in states of suspended animation' (16). To be inside the Convergence is at once to be incorporated into an outsized artwork and to be sealed away in futuristic catacombs.

Dystopian novels often critique totalitarian tendencies in the present by extrapolating those trends into the future, where shadowy forces have secured unlimited power by reducing the masses to mindless machines in service to the state. *Zero K* descends in part from this lineage. Jeff is highly sceptical of the means and motives of the Convergence's masterminds, as well as the wealthy moguls (like his father) who seek immortality there. Contemplating some clients already frozen in their cryogenic pods, Jeff thinks, 'It occurred to me that these were humans as mannequins' (146). Plastic mannequins are scattered in curious poses throughout the facility, and Jeff intuits that the agenda of the Convergence is to reduce humans to mannequins, converting subjects into objects: 'I wondered if I was looking at the controlled future, men and women being subordinated, willingly or not, to some form of centralized command. Mannequinized lives' (146). The deeper Jeff penetrates into the place, the more his fears are confirmed. Late in the novel he encounters several cryogenically preserved bodies, with their heads removed, serving as statuary decorations. No attempt is made to hide this blatant dehumanisation; on the contrary, Ross and Jeff receive a guided tour through a wing of human statues. An escort explains, '"This is not a silicone-and-fiberglass replica. Real flesh, human tissue, human being. Body preserved for a limited time by cryoprotectants applied to the skin"' (231). Jeff observes, 'There were several other figures, some female, and the bodies were clearly on display, as in a museum corridor, all without heads. I assumed that the brains were in chilled storage and that the headless motif was a reference to pre-classical statuary dug up from ruins' (232). No heads, no thoughts, no agency. Jeff muses, 'This was their idea of postmortem decor and it occurred to me that there was a prediction implied in this exhibit. Human bodies, saturated with advanced preservatives, serving as mainstays in the art markets of the future' (232). The future belongs to those who can convert crowds of minions into collections of mannequins.

Jeff is sensitive to the totalitarian pretensions of the Convergence, but he is far less attuned to his own objectifying tendencies. He exhibits some of the scopophilic desires and voyeuristic behaviour characteristic of the other 'art stalkers' who creep throughout DeLillo's late works. Jeff looks at women as sex objects, and he looks at objects in fetishised ways. When he spies his first mannequin at the Convergence, his instinctive response is arousal:

> I saw that it was a mannequin, naked, hairless, without facial features, and it was reddish brown, maybe russet or simply rust. There were breasts, it had breasts, and I stopped to study the figure, a molded plastic version of the human body, a jointed model of a woman. I imagined placing a hand on a breast. This seemed required, particularly if you are me. (24)

He fantasises that this mannequin is helplessly fending off his advances:

> The head was a near oval, arms positioned in a manner that I tried to decipher – self-defense, withdrawal, with one foot set to the rear. The figure was rooted to the floor, not enclosed in protective glass. A hand on a breast, a hand sliding up a thigh. It's something I would have done once upon a time. (24–5)

Later, Jeff encounters a silent, anonymous woman who escorts him back to his compartment for sex. She is apparently a 'gift' from his father, ordered as effortlessly as a

room-service hamburger. This woman is human, not a mannequin, but she is granted no more voice or agency than a blow-up doll. Here Jeff is exposed as the one turning a human into an art object. He mounts her on the wall like a painting: 'I stood and moved into her, smearing her into the wall, imagining an imprint, a body mark that would take days to melt away' (78). In *Mao II* and *Falling Man*, DeLillo swims against the stream of typical ekphrasis by focusing on women gazing at men or objects made by men. In *Zero K*, however, he leans into the misogyny of the tradition, presenting Jeff as so driven by scopophilia that he is practically a caricature of the male gaze.

Jeff isn't a sexual predator, though. His predominant desire is to enter the minds of women more than their bodies. The primary focus of his attention is mothers rather than lovers, and his most telling ekphrastic encounters don't lead sexwards but deathwards. Like Lianne in *Falling Man*, Jeff fails to penetrate the membrane of alterity and get inside the unmediated experience of the other. So instead, he resorts to filling in the silence with his own words. This classic ekphrasis is exemplified by the centrepiece of *Zero K*, the section titled 'ARTIS MARTINEAU', in all caps like a gravestone epitaph. The stream-of-consciousness patter and ontological groping in this bewildering section represents the thought process of Jeff's stepmother, frozen in her futuristic urn, like an encephalographic readout of a mind in limbo. The section is written in the first person, except for periodic narrative interjections which are italicized and written in the third person: '*She is first person and third person both*' (158). Artis seemingly alternates between depicting her experience from without and within, recording her subjective sensations and then stepping outside herself to offer detached self-commentary. But this portrait of Artis is all artifice. Late in the novel, Jeff more or less admits his authorship of the section, providing this ekphrasis of his imaginary snapshot of Artis's mind:

> I think of Artis in the capsule and try to imagine, against my firm belief, that she is able to experience a minimal consciousness. I think of her in a state of virgin solitude. No stimulus, no human activity to incite response, barest trace of memory. Then I try to imagine an inner monologue, hers, self-generated, possibly nonstop, the open prose of a third-person voice that is also her voice, a form of chant in a single low tone. (272)

If she will not surrender intimate details about her experience in the pod, then he will simply invent her testimony, sign it in her name, and bury it in the centre of his own narrative. The reference to Artis's 'virgin solitude' sounds like a direct allusion to Keats's opening characterisation of the urn as a 'still unravish'd bride of quietness' (Keats 223). 'ARTIS MARTINEAU' is Jeff's 'Ode on a Cryogenic Pod'. Artis's cryogenic preservation represents her attempt to achieve immortality, an effort Jeff regards as doomed hubris. She is not definitively dead, but neither is she really alive in any worthwhile, meaningful sense. His speculative fiction exposes her suspended existence as self-imposed solitary confinement in a solipsistic prison without any realistic hope for parole.

Jeff's meditations on his stepmother's mortality propel him deeper inwards to memories of his mother's death. He was very close to his mother Madeline Siebert, and their bond only strengthened after she divorced Ross Lockhart. As an awkward, alienated, idiosyncratic kid, Jeff felt abandoned by Ross, but he felt understood and appreciated by Madeline. Jeff frequently remembers sitting beside his mother as she lay dying, accompanied by one of her devoted friends. Much like Lianne's mental still life of Mother/Lover/Daughter, Jeff retains a framed visual memory of Mother/Friend/Son gathered around the deathbed. He clings to this image as a talisman, returning to it again and again. His first flashback occurs as he and Ross assemble around Artis's bed at the Convergence. This similar image prompts Jeff to remember:

> When my mother died, at home, I was seated next to the bed and there was a friend of hers, a woman with a cane, standing in the doorway. That's how I would picture the moment, narrowed, now and always, to the woman in the bed, the woman in the doorway, the bed itself, the metal cane. (9)

This memory stands as a quotidian emblem of natural death, starkly at odds with the stylised sheen and death-defying delusions offered by the Convergence. Jeff has pared down the composition of this *idée fixe* to its essential ingredients: Madeline lying in bed, the friend leaning on her cane in the doorway, Jeff sitting in a chair by the bed. Jeff is both the gazer and the gazed upon, third person and first person, subject and object. 'It's all about mortality', just as Nina observed of the Morandi still lifes (*Falling Man* 111). Jeff's preoccupation with his own mental still life is no morbid obsession, however, for he also finds calm, tenderness, solace and ballast in contemplating this veronica, this sacred relic of his mother's death.

Late in *Zero K*, having fallen asleep in his chair (another trigger), Jeff awakes in his compartment at the Convergence and immediately senses his mother's aura in the room. This ghostly visitation prompts his final ekphrastic response to the talismanic deathbed image:

> I'd never felt more human than I did when my mother lay in bed, dying. This was not the frailty of a man who is said to be 'only human', subject to a weakness or a vulnerability. This was a wave of sadness and loss that made me understand that I was a man expanded by grief. There were memories, everywhere, unsummoned. There were images, visions, voices and how a woman's last breath gives expression to her son's constrained humanity. Here was the neighbor with the cane, motionless, ever so, in the doorway, and here was my mother, an arm's length away, a touch away, in stillness. (248)

Jeff imbues the image with pathos, affection and reverence. But there is also an element of appropriation. Jeff tends to co-opt others into serving his needs. Madeline suffered and died, yet her son focuses chiefly on the tutelary benefit her death had for him, expanding him with grief and making him more human. All the while, in classic ekphrastic fashion, she is depicted as an inscrutable figure of stillness and silence. Nevertheless, to Jeff's credit, he seems willing in this final encounter to honour his mother's quotidian mystery. When it comes to the artificial quasi-death of Artis, he cannot resist the temptation to seek explanation and resolution by composing an ode on her experience in the pod. However, he resists this temptation when it comes to Madeline, permitting the silence to speak for itself. Rather than fill her up with his own interpolations, Jeff respects her loving life with an inner *Natura morta* of her natural death, an image he curates and revisits in the memory gallery of his mind.

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14

Staged Events: Don DeLillo, the Short Story, Intellectuals and the Arts

Henry Veggian

Don DeLillo's public readings have a way of unsettling an audience. It is not so much that his manner of reading is itself particularly notable: his voice is deliberate and even paced, his body language understated, and he calmly turns the pages at intervals. He evenly reads the work he has chosen for the occasion.

What is often unsettling, however, is the relation between the writing from which he reads and the occasion itself. Attentive listeners will note that the subdued manner of delivery pushes the words to the foreground. As they fill the room and resonate with the occasion, the effect is one of a performative intervention. The effect I am describing is not limited to public readings, however. It is also a characteristic of short works that he publishes, as they too are selected strategically at times to function in their context of publication as a performance of sorts, in which the writing comments on the occasion of publication. I would offer two examples from public readings I have attended (one of which is available to view online) as well as a published short story to explain how DeLillo's short works use the instruments of fiction writing to transform a reading or publication into an event in which his shorter writings explore, transfigure and defend the 'arts' writ large. Here I have in mind not only varied forms of written expression, or the fine arts, or modern cinema and so forth, but also what were once politely known as the 'industrial arts' of printing, graphic design and other techniques that reproduce the arts as commodity forms.

An example of the unsettling effect: in the spring of 2013 DeLillo read excerpts from *Underworld* in a small conference room at Duke University. He selected the passages describing Nick Shay's life, which included Nick's accidental murder of George Manza and the ennui of his retirement. The occasion for the reading was also a retirement – that of the literary critic Frank Lentricchia. The effect of the selected passages was not lost upon anyone – the room was so quiet that you could hear DeLillo's fingers lift the pages from which he read.

A small, intimate event, on the occasion of a friend's retirement, might seem an exception. One might say DeLillo took liberties with the daring selection of passages because he was comfortable doing so: he knew the intellectual audience of students and faculty would be sympathetic; the focus of the selected passages was a fellow Italian-American's retirement rather than a fictional Italian-American's murder (a high-wire act, to say the least). But the uncomfortable implications of the content were strategically well-chosen beyond any personal sentiment or morbid joke: DeLillo had chosen to read from a work about the end of a world-historical era, the Cold War, and appeared