

Winterson, Jeanette. "Art Objects."
Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery.
New York, Vintage International, 1995. 3-21.

https://bobcat.library.nyu.edu/permalink/f/1c17uag/nyu_aleph000542546

ART OBJECTS

I was in Amsterdam one snowy Christmas when the weather had turned the canals into oblongs of ice. I was wandering happy, alone, playing the flaneur, when I passed a little gallery and in the moment of passing saw a painting that had more power to stop me than I had power to walk on.

The quality of the draughtsmanship, the brush strokes in thin oils, had a Renaissance beauty, but the fearful and compelling thing about the picture was its modernity. Here was a figure without a context, in its own context, a haunted woman in blue robes pulling a huge moon face through a subterranean waterway.

What was I to do, standing hesitant, my heart flooded away?

I fled across the road and into a bookshop. There I would be safe, surrounded by things I understood, unchallenged, except by my own discipline. Books I know, endlessly, intimately. Their power over me is profound, but I do know them. I confess that until that day I had not much

interest in the visual arts, although I realise now, that my lack of interest was the result of the kind of ignorance I despair of in others. I knew nothing about painting and so I got very little from it. I had never given a picture my full attention even for one hour.

What was I to do?

I had intended to leave Amsterdam the next day. I changed my plans, and sleeping fitfully, rising early, queued to get into the Rijksmuseum, into the Van Gogh Museum, spending every afternoon at any private galleries I could find, and every evening, reading, reading, reading. My turmoil of mind was such that I could only find a kind of peace by attempting to determine the size of the problem. My problem. The paintings were perfectly at ease. I had fallen in love and I had no language. I was dog dumb. The usual response of 'This painting has nothing to say to me' had become 'I have nothing to say to this painting'. And I desperately wanted to speak.

Long looking at paintings is equivalent. to being dropped into a foreign city, where gradually, out of desire and despair, a few key words, then a little syntax make a clearing in the silence. Art, all art, not just paintings is a foreign city, and we deceive ourselves when we think it familiar. No is surprised to find that a foreign city follows its own customs and speaks its own language. Only a boor would ignore both and blame his defaulting on the place. Every day this happens to the artist and the art.

We have to recognise that the language of art, all art, is not our mother- tongue.

I read Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. I read Pater's *Studies of the History of the Renaissance*. Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses*, Bernard Berenson, Kenneth Clark, Sickert's *A Free House!*, Whistler's *Ten O'Clock Lecture*, Vasari, Michael Levey, William Morris. I knew my Dante, and I was looking for a guide, for someone astute and erudite with whom I had something in common, a way of thinking. A person dead or alive with whom I could talk things over. I needed someone I could trust, who would negotiate with me the sublimities and cesspits of regions hitherto closed. Someone fluent in this strange language and its dialects, who had spent many years in that foreign city and who might introduce me to the locals and their rather odd habits. Art is odd, and the common method of trying to fit it into the scheme of things, **either by taming it or baiting it, cannot succeed. Who at the zoo has any sense of the lion?**

At last, back home, and ransacking the shelves of second-hand bookshops, I found Roger Fry. It may seem hopelessly old-fashioned to have returned to Bloomsbury, but I do not care about fashion, only about permanencies, and if books, music and pictures are happy enough to be indifferent to time, then so am I.

Fry was the one I wanted. For me, at least, a perfect guide, close enough in spirit to Walter Pater, but necessarily firmer. I had better come clean now and say that I do not believe that art (all art) and beauty are ever separate, nor do I believe that either art or beauty are optional in a sane society. That puts me on the side of what Harold Bloom calls 'the ecstasy

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

I knew about Roger Fry because I had read Virginia Woolf's biography of him, and because it is impossible to be interested in Modernism without finding reference to him. It was he who gave us the term 'a Post-Impressionist', without realising that the late twentieth century would soon be entirely fenced in with posts.

A Quaker, trained as a scientist, passionate about painting, Roger Fry did more than anyone else in Britain to promote and protect new work during the first thirty years of the century. The key quality in Fry's writing is enthusiasm. Nothing to him is dull. Such a life-delighting, art-delighting approach, unashamed of emotion, unashamed of beauty, was what I needed.

I decided that my self-imposed studentship would perform a figure of eight. I would concentrate my reading on priests and prophets of the past, while focusing my looking on modern painters. This saved me from the Old Master syndrome and it allowed me to approach a painting without unfelt reverence or unfit complacency. At the same time it allowed me to test out the theories and assumptions of the art writers whose company I kept. For me, this lemniscate of back and forth has proved the right method. I still know far far less about pictures than I do about books and this will not change. **What has changed is my way of**

seeing I am learning how to look at pictures. What has changed is my capacity of feeling. Art opens the heart.

Art takes time. To spend an hour looking at a painting is difficult. The public gallery experience is one that encourages art at a trot. There are the paintings, the marvellous speaking works, definite, independent, each with a Self it would be impossible to ignore, if . . . if . . ., it were possible to see it. I do not only mean the crowds and the guards and the low lights and the ropes, which make me think of freak shows, I mean the thick curtain of irrelevancies that screens the painting from the viewer. Increasingly, galleries have a habit of saying when they acquired a painting and how much it cost . . .

Millions! The viewer does not see the colours on the canvas, he sees the colour of the money.

Is the painting famous? Yes! Think of all the people who have carefully spared one minute of their lives to stand in front of it.

Is the painting Authority? Does the guide-book tell us that it is part of The Canon? If Yes, then half of the viewers will admire it on principle, while the other half will dismiss it on principle.

Who painted it? What do we know about his/her sexual practices and have we seen anything about them on the television? If not, the museum will likely have a video full of schoolboy facts and tabloid gossip.

Where is the tea-room/toilet/gift shop?

Where is the painting in any of this?

Experiencing paintings as moving pictures, out of context, disconnected, jostled, over-literary, with their endless accompanying explanations, over-crowded, one against the other, room on room, does not make it easy to fall in love. Love takes time. It may be that if you have as much difficulty with museums as I do, that the only way into the strange life of pictures is to expose yourself to as much contemporary art as you can until you find something, anything, that you will go back and back to see again, and even make great sacrifices to buy. Inevitably, if you start to love pictures, you will start to buy pictures. The time, like the money, can be found, and those who call the whole business elitist, might be fair enough to reckon up the time they spend in front of the television, at the DIY store, and how much the latest satellite equipment and new PC has cost.

For myself, now that paintings matter, public galleries are much less disappointing. I have learned to ignore everything about them, except for the one or two pieces with whom I have come to spend the afternoon.

Supposing we made a pact with a painting and agreed to sit down and look at it, on our own, with no distractions, for one hour. The painting should be an original, not a reproduction, and we should start with the advantage of liking it, even if only a little. What would we find?

Increasing discomfort. When was the last time you looked at anything, solely, and concentratedly, and for its own sake? Ordinary life passes in a near blur. If we go to the theatre or the cinema, the images before us change constantly, and there is the distraction of language. Our loved ones are so well known to us that there is no need to look at them, and one of the gentle jokes of married life is that we do not. Nevertheless, here is a painting and we have agreed to look at it for one hour. We find we are not very good at looking.

Increasing distraction. Is my mind wandering to the day's work, to the football match, to what's for dinner, to sex, to whatever it is that will give me something to do other than to look at the painting?

Increasing invention. After some time spent daydreaming, the guilty or the dutiful might wrench back their attention to the picture.

What is it about? Is it a landscape? Is it figurative? More promisingly, is it a nude? If the picture seems to offer an escape route then this is the moment to take it. I can make up stories about the characters on the canvas much as art historians like to identify the people in Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. Now I am beginning to feel much more confident because I am truly engaging with the picture. A picture is its subject matter isn't it? Oh dear, mine's an abstract. Never mind, would that pink suit me?

Increasing irritation. Why doesn't the picture do something? Why is it hanging there staring at me? What is this picture

for? Pictures should give pleasure but this picture is making me very cross. Why should I admire it? Quite clearly it doesn't admire me . . .

Admire me is the sub-text of so much of our looking; the demand put on art that it should reflect the reality of the viewer. The true painting, in its stubborn independence, cannot do this, except coincidentally. Its reality is imaginative not mundane.

When the thick curtain of protection is taken away; protection of prejudice, protection of authority, protection of trivia, even the most familiar of paintings can begin to work its power. There are very few people who could manage an hour alone with the Mona Lisa.

But our poor art-lover in his aesthetic laboratory has not succeeded in freeing himself from the protection of assumption. What he has found is that the painting objects to his lack of concentration; his failure to meet intensity with intensity. He still has not discovered anything about the painting but the painting has discovered a lot about him. He is inadequate and the painting has told him so.

It is not as hopeless as it seems. If I can be persuaded to make the experiment again (and again and again), something very different might occur after the first shock of finding out that I do not know how to look at pictures, let alone how to like them.

A favourite writer of mine, an American, an animal trainer, a Yale philosopher, Vicki Hearne, has written of the acute

awkwardness and embarrassment of those who work with magnificent animals, and find themselves at a moment of reckoning, summed up in those deep and difficult eyes. Art has deep and difficult eyes and for many the gaze is too insistent. Better to pretend that art is dumb, or at least has nothing to say that makes sense to us. If art, all art, is concerned with truth, then a society in denial will not find much use for it.

In the West, we avoid painful encounters with art by trivialising it, or by familiarising it. Our present obsession with the past has the double advantage of making new work seem raw and rough compared to the cosy patina of tradition, whilst refusing tradition its vital connection to what is happening now. By making islands of separation out of the unbreakable chain of human creativity, we are able to set up false comparisons, false expectations, all the while lamenting that the music, poetry, painting, prose, performance art of Now, fails to live up to the art of Then, which is why, we say, it does not affect us. In fact, we are no more moved by a past we are busy inventing, than by a present we are busy denying. If you love a Cezanne, you can love a Hockney, can love a Boyd, can love a Rao. If you love a Cezanne rather than lip-service it.

We are an odd people: We make it as difficult as possible for our artists to work honestly while they are alive; either we refuse them money or we ruin them with money; either we flatter them with unhelpful praise or wound them with unhelpful blame, and when they are too old, or too dead, or

ART OBJECTS

too beyond dispute to hinder any more, we canonise them, so that what was wild is tamed, what was objecting, becomes Authority. Canonising pictures is one way of killing them. When the sense of familiarity becomes too great, history, popularity, association, all crowd in between the viewer and the picture and block it out. Not only pictures suffer like this, all the arts suffer like this.

That is one reason why the calling of the artist, in any medium, is to make it new. I do not mean that in new work the past is repudiated; quite the opposite, the past is reclaimed. It is not lost to authority, it is not absorbed at a level of familiarity. It is re-stated and re-instated in its original vigour. Leonardo is present in Cezanne, Michelangelo flows through Picasso and on into Hockney. This is not ancestor worship, it is the lineage of art. It is not so much influence as it is connection.

I do not want to argue here about great artists, I want to concentrate on true artists, major or minor, who are connected to the past and who themselves make a connection to the future. The true artist is connected. The true artist studies the past, not as a copyist or a pasticheur will study the past, those people are interested only in the final product, the art object, signed sealed and delivered to a public drugged on reproduction. The true artist is interested in the art object as an art process, the thing in being, the being of the thing, the struggle, the excitement, the energy, that have found expression in a particular way. The true artist is after the problem. The false artist wants it solved (by somebody else).

If the true artist is connected, then he or she has much to give us because it is connection that we seek. Connection to the past, to one another, to the physical world, still compelling, in spite of the ravages of technology. A picture, a book, a piece of music, can remind me of feelings, thinkings, I did not even know I had forgot. Whether art tunnels deep under consciousness or whether it causes out of its own invention, reciprocal inventions that we then call memory, I do not know. I do know that the process of art is a series of jolts, or perhaps I mean volts, for art is an extraordinarily faithful transmitter. Our job is to keep our receiving equipment in good working order.

How?

It is impossible to legislate taste, and if it were possible, it would be repugnant. There are no Commandments in art and no easy axioms for art appreciation. 'Do I like this?' is the question anyone should ask themselves at the moment of confrontation with the picture. But if 'yes', why 'yes'? and if 'no', why 'no'? The obvious direct emotional response is never simple, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the 'yes' or 'no' has nothing at all to do with the picture in its own night.

'I don't understand this poem'

'I never listen to classical music'

'I don't like this picture'

are common enough statements but not ones that tell us anything about books, painting, or music. They are statements that tell us something about the speaker. That

should be obvious, but in fact, such statements are offered as criticisms of art, as evidence against, not least because the ignorant, the lazy, or the plain confused are not likely to want to admit themselves as such. We hear a lot about the arrogance of the artist but nothing about the arrogance of the audience. The audience, who have not done the work, who have not taken any risks, whose life and livelihood are not bound up at every moment with what they are making, who have given no thought to the medium or the method, will glance up, flick through, chatter over the opening chords, then snap their fingers and walk away like some monstrous Roman tyrant. This is not arrogance; of course they can absorb in a few moments, and without any effort, the sum of the artist and the art.

If the obvious direct emotional response is to have any meaning, the question 'Do I like this?' will have to be the opening question and not the final judgement. An examination of our own feelings will have to give way to an examination of the piece of work. This is fair to the work and it will help to clarify the nature of our own feelings; to reveal prejudice, opinion, anxiety, even the mood of the day. It is right to trust our feelings but right to test them too. If they are what we say they are, they will stand the test, if not, we will at least be less insincere. But here we come back to the first hurdle of art, and it is a high one; it shows us up.

When you say 'This work has nothing to do with me'. When you say 'This work is boring/pointless/silly/obscure/elitist etc.', you might be right, because you are looking at a fad, or you might be wrong because the work falls so outside of the safety of your own experience that in

order to keep your own world intact, you must deny the other world of the painting. This denial of imaginative experience happens at a deeper level than our affirmation of our daily world. Every day, in countless ways, you and I convince ourselves about ourselves. True art, when it happens to us, challenges the 'I' that we are.

A love-parallel would be just; falling in love challenges the reality to which we lay claim, part of the pleasure of love and part of its terror, is the world turned upside down. We want and we don't want, the cutting edge, the upset, the new views. Mostly we work hard at taming our emotional environment just as we work hard at taming our aesthetic environment. We already have tamed our physical environment. And are we happy with all this tameness? Are you?

Art cannot be tamed, although our responses to it can be, and in relation to The Canon, our responses are conditioned from the moment we start school. The freshness which the everyday regular man or woman pride themselves upon; the untaught 'I know what I like' approach, now encouraged by the media, is neither fresh nor untaught. It is the half-baked sterility of the classroom washed down with liberal doses of popular culture.

The media ransacks the arts, in its images, in its adverts, in its copy, in its jingles, in its little tunes and journalist's Jargon, it continually offers up faint shadows of the form and invention of real music, real paintings, real words. All of us are subject to this bombardment, which both deadens our

ART OBJECTS

sensibilities and makes us fear what is not instant, approachable, consumable. The solid presence of art demands from us significant effort, an effort anathema to popular culture. Effort of time, effort of money, effort of study, effort of humility, effort of imagination have each been packed by the artist into the art. Is it so unreasonable to expect a percentage of that from us in return? I worry that to ask for effort is to imply elitism, and the charge against art, that it is elitist, is too often the accuser's defence against his or her own bafflement. It is quite close to the remark 'Why can't they all speak English?', which may be why elitist is the favourite insult of the British and the Americans.

But, you may say, how can I know what is good and what is not good? I may wince at the cheap seascape over the mantelpiece but does that necessarily mean I should go to the Tate Gallery and worship a floor full of dyed rice?

Years ago, when I was living very briefly with a stockbroker who had a good cellar, I asked him how I could learn about wine.

'Drink it' he said.

It is true. The only way to develop a palate is to develop a palate. That is why, when I wanted to know about paintings, I set out to look at as many as I could, using always, tested standards, but continuing to test them. You can like a thing out of ignorance, and it is perhaps a blessing that such naivete stays with us until we die. Even now, we are not as

closed and muffled as art-pessimists think we are, we do still fall in love at first sight. All well and good, but the fashion for dismissing a thing out of ignorance is vicious. In fact, it is not essential to like a thing in order to recognise its worth, but to reach that point of self-awareness and sophistication takes years of perseverance.

For most of us the question 'Do I like this?' will always be the formative question. Vital then, that we widen the 'I' that we are as much as we can. Vital then, we recognise that the question 'Do I like this?' involves an independent object, as well as our own subjectivity.

I am sure that if as a society we took art seriously, not as mere decoration or entertainment, but as a living spirit, we should very soon learn what is art and what is not art. The American poet Muneel Rukeyser has said:

There is art and there is non-art; they are two universes (in the algebraic sense) which are exclusive . . . It seems to me that to call an achieved work 'good art' and an unachieved work 'bad art', is like calling one colour 'good red' and another 'bad red' when the second one is green.

If we accept this, it does not follow that we should found an Academy of Good Taste or throw out all our pet water-colours, student posters or family portraits. Let them be but know what they are, and perhaps more importantly, what they are not. If we sharpened our sensibilities, it is not that we would all agree on everything, or that we would suddenly feel the same things in front of the same pictures (or when reading the same book), but rather that our debates

and deliberations would come out of genuine aesthetic considerations and not politics, prejudice and fashion . . . And our hearts? Art is aerobic.

It is shocking too. The most conservative and least interested person will probably tell you that he or she likes Constable. But would our stalwart have liked Constable in 1824 when he exhibited at the Paris Salon and caused a riot? We forget that every true shock in art, whether books, paintings or music, eventually becomes a commonplace, even a standard, to later generations. It is not that those works are tired out and have nothing more to offer, it is that their discoveries are gradually diluted by lesser artists who can only copy but do know how to make a thing accessible and desirable. At last, what was new becomes so well known that we cannot separate it from its cultural associations and time-honoured values. To the average eye, now, Constable is a pretty landscape painter, not a revolutionary who daubed bright colour against bright colour ungraded by chiaroscuro. We have had a hundred and fifty years to get used to the man who turned his back on the studio picture, took his easel outdoors and painted in a rapture of light. It is easy to copy Constable. It was not easy to be Constable.

I cannot afford a Constable, or a Picasso, or a Leonardo, but to profess a love of painting and not to have anything original is as peculiar as a booklover with nothing on her shelves. I do not know why the crowds and crowds of visitors to public galleries do not go out and support new work. Are we talking love-affair or peep-show?

I move gingerly around the paintings I own because I know they are looking at me as closely as I am looking at them. There is a constant exchange of emotion between us, between the three of us; the artist I need never meet, the painting in its own right, and me, the one who loves it and can no longer live independent of it. The triangle of exchange alters, is fluid, is subtle, is profound and is one of those unverifiable facts that anyone who cares for painting soon discovers. The picture on my wall, art object and art process, is a living line of movement, a wave of colour that repercusses in my body, colouring it, colouring the new present, the future, and even the past, which cannot now be considered outside of the light of the painting. I think of something I did, the picture catches me, adds to the thought, changes the meaning of thought and past. The totality of the picture comments on the totality of what I am. The greater the picture the more complete this process is.

Process, the energy in being, the refusal of finality, which is not the same thing as the refusal of completeness, sets art, all art, apart from the end-stop world that is always calling 'Time Please!'.

We know that the universe is infinite, expanding and strangely complete, that it lacks nothing we need, but in spite of that knowledge, the tragic paradigm of human life is lack, loss, finality, a primitive doomsaying that has not been repealed by technology or medical science. The arts stand in the way of this doomsaying. Art objects. The nouns become an active force not a collector's item. Art objects.

The cave wall paintings at Lascaux, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the huge truth of a Picasso, the quieter truth of

ART OBJECTS

Vanessa Bell, are part of the art that objects to the lie against life, against the spirit, that it is pointless and mean. The message coloured through time is not lack, but abundance. Not silence but many voices. Art, all art, is the communication cord that cannot be snapped by indifference or disaster. Against the daily death it does not die. All painting is cave painting; painting on the low dark walls of you and me, intimations of grandeur. The painted church is the tattooed body of Christ, not bound into religion, but unbound out of love. Love, the eloquent shorthand that volumes out those necessary invisibles of faith and optimism, humour and generosity, sublimity of mankind made visible through art.

Naked I came into the world, but brush strokes cover me, language raises me, music rhythms me. Art is my rod and staff, my resting place and shield, and not mine only, for art leaves nobody out. Even those from whom art has been stolen away by tyranny, by poverty, begin to make it again. If the arts did not exist, at every moment, someone would begin to create them, in song, out of dust and mud, and although the artifacts might be destroyed, the energy that creates them is not destroyed. If, in the comfortable West, we have chosen to treat such energies with scepticism and contempt, then so much the worse for us. Art is not a little bit of evolution that late-twentieth-century city dwellers can safely do without. Strictly, art does not belong to our evolutionary pattern at all. It has no biological necessity. Time taken up with it was time lost to hunting, gathering,

mating exploring, building, surviving, thriving. Odd then, that when routine physical threats to ourselves and our kind are no longer a reality, we say we have no time for art.

If we say that art, all art is no longer relevant to our lives, then we might at least risk the question 'What has happened to our lives?' The usual question, 'What has happened to art?' is too easy an escape route.

I did not escape. At an Amsterdam gallery I sat down and wept.

When I sold a book I bought a Massimo Rao. Since that day I have been filling my walls with new light.