which does not mean goodness comes bundled with books

Ethical reading requires effort, which is good preparation for goodness. A morally safe book is merely a resource that, though it be with you at all times, is hopelessly ineffective as a means of defence against evil. And when you look within your heart, hopefully it is not to copy it.

which does not mean certain books should be put down for your own good

Even immoral books do not corrupt on their own. It takes deep engagement and susceptibility to be spoiled by what you read. Treat morally dubious reading as an ethical contest, with the text as facilitator of a challenge (and not to be confused with your real opponent, yourself).

If you want to hold a book to ethical account, start with yourself, then move on to its author. The text should be last in line, after either you or its author had failed to make a bad impression. Its comparative faults, if it has them, will then stand out.
§ Who Spits Farther

The cult of the artist by the artist is still alive and well, now perhaps more than ever before. The arena is crowded, there can be few victors. And this is what makes artist communities without mediocrities a veritable pipe dream, even when dreamt by the great and prodigious. In a spitting contest there is only talk of technique, but true talent, individual style or vision, is not shareable. And “why should one artist grasp another?”* It won’t help either of them get ahead. For one artist to be grasped by another artist signifies artistic failure. For an artist to be grasped by everyone else—artistic success.

§ Called Literature

This persistent naming . . . we call literature.
—Paul De Man†

The odyssey of naming, which took us from speech to writing between the Scylla and Charybdis of the encyclopedia and the novel to Literature and then the logosphere, is at an end. Why? Just because! Things heated up, literature was brought to a boil, to a word reduction. It no longer rears its head in any discursive domain that claims demystifying powers. It is now part of the cold soup we drink daily, preferring not to know the ingredients.

§ No Other Gods

Now that you have lost your faith in Literature—it does nothing for your *amour propre* these days—you can believe in writing.

I deliberately did not say “keep your belief” in writing, or “continue to believe” in it, because your devotion to Literature pretty well precluded it. And this “new” belief is not so new either—if that is any succor. Replaced by faith in Literature some generations back, it too had once demanded exclusivity.

§ Last Words

It is a writer and not the Author who will have the last word.

§ Burial Site

You can keep writing books to keep up appearances if it makes life easier. But remember that you’re making things harder for others. For instance, future archaeologists, who may conclude from the literary remains with which you were buried that, as late as the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was still something called Literature.
§ Unembarrassable

So far we’ve had it backwards; authors represent their works, not works their authors. Forget a book embarrassing its author; these days writers are unembarrassable. They grow thick skin telling themselves they’ll do better next time, and develop calluses to turn all the more nimbly on their heel away from “bad” readers.

Books have no will; to order them not to embarrass us writers would be lunacy. The onus was, then, traditionally on authors to heed the commandment Do not write books that would embarrass you. But now all worry about bad judgment has been laid to rest by the “tropical climate” of publishing. Nothing written for the public can come back to haunt us. Everything can be recast as a warmup exercise.

With the new climate, however, comes a new responsibility. Now that opportunities for authors to pronounce on their work have grown out of all proportion, writers should be careful not to embarrass their own productions. Much like parents—who does not cringe at the memory?—should not embarrass their adolescent children (still treated like personal property) just when these are at their most original, most embarrassable. As we writers grow old, barren and loquacious, and the gap between us and our children widens, our works burn with shame.
Broken Levees

*We do not reject the offer, but we do not accept it.*

—Ukrainian opposition in reply to Yanukhovich’s offer to share power in January 2014*

Given the deluge of new manuscripts to all the presses that cannot afford better levees, the wise author reads a publisher’s silence as an invitation to revise. When eventually the manuscript is again submitted, it is to another press.

There is nothing like being ignored to get under the skin of the truly dedicated. Form rejection letters should be abandoned; not only do they drain the press of resources in this cash-strapped age, they also rile the blood, focus resentment, and trigger juvenile behaviour best not discussed. They offer easy external targets of blame, when a harder, internal one would serve our interests far more. There is no denying that they damage the psyche of writers, who worship *per definitionem* at the altar of their own uniqueness. For that reason, the value for dedicated writers of a sensitive personalized letter cannot be disputed. It is to be cherished unconditionally and framed. But for those talents who have not honed their skills enough to merit one, nor have the sureness or ambition to keep on with one eye on the pile of snappy turn-downs, silence is most beneficial where acceptance is not forthcoming. They fill this silence with questions: *Who am I writing for? What am I good for? Shall I change how I do things? Should I keep at it?* Where a rejection slip would have bruised and provoked expletives about the intelligence of publishers and readers, silence inspires reflection. Where an explicit, unadorned NO would have led to hang-ups and stagnation, silence is not just easier on the writer’s fragile ego; it allows it to grow.

§ The Good, the Bad, and the Beyond

The beauty of the new fragmented novel is that writers can have it both ways. These books pay deference to complexity, that deity of the lit critic, but they are also marked by an intense devotion to plot, pacing and other elements of traditional craft. Highbrow and lowbrow elements are pleasingly blurred. Experimentation proves that it is compatible with accessibility. I am attracted to these books — and I suspect others are as well — because of their skill in serving such conflicting masters, and without obvious compromises.

—Ted Gioia*

Those moved to evaluate aesthetic objects on ethical grounds very quickly realize that nothing is simply “good” or “bad” (and not just because it is made so solely by thinking). The introduction of additional categories attests to our acuity and discernment. Let us take novels as our example, for there can always be found a critic who follows the stocks of tradition yet does not fail to invest in the new and comely. We must straightaway mark the good “bad” novel for special distinction: successfully revolutionary, unsettling bourgeois prescriptions for success and mainstream values. Conversely, there is the bad “good” kind: oh-so bourgeois, promoting and reinforcing mainstream literary values. And who cannot name at least one good “good” novel, that badly bourgeois work surrendering to and failing even by the standards it follows? It still deserves consideration, if only for honestly trying. But as its author, do not expect a shortlist anywhere; the two positives, good and good, make a very strong positive in our assessment because such books represent the dismal failure to guard these tired standards. And finally (if such hair-splitting can have an end) there is the bad “bad” novel: failed, still however creditable for trying to be revolutionary;

in this case the two negatives, *bad* and *bad*, also make a positive, however weak, for there is much to recommend the work, even if in the end it confirms the strength of the bourgeois grip on art. These labels we have proposed can be reversed to reflect the opposite bias. Thus, the *good* “*bad*” can be called *bad* “*good*,” or simply *bad* *bad*; the *bad* “*good*” easily turns into *good* “*bad*,” or *good* *good*, and so on. (If any of this is at all confusing, you may first need to sort out your loyalties.)

But we are not yet through. There is additionally the question of degree, and some books merit a stronger response. The worst ones, those beyond *good* and *bad* (or “*good*” and “*bad*”), are those that betray both “sides”—for and against revolution, or for and against the status quo. These productions are exposed for trying to “serve two masters” by claiming to be revolutionary while beneath their unconventionality buying into bourgeois literary codes and conventions of thought and feeling. They are unfaithful sell-outs. The terrible failure of this worst of books is that both sides would claim it, were it “true,” but under the circumstances neither wants anything to do with it. It follows that the most terrific success, and the best book of all, beyond the categories *good* and *bad* (or “*good*” and “*bad*”) and their pileups, is one the two “masters” are prepared to fight over, each claiming to be the rightful one, without ever doubting the fidelity of what they are fighting over. As such, this best work is the likeliest to be torn to shreds—not by rabid criticism but the most rapturous adoration.
Novel Experiments

I thought of this project as a kind of experiment in realistic prose. How far is it possible to go into detail before the novel cracks and becomes unreadable?

—Karl Ove Knausgård,
author of Min Kamp (My Struggle)*

He forgot to add: banal detail. Detail as such will never crack the novel. And if he had thought it through beforehand, rather than rationalized what he’d done, he would have known that nothing is unreadable, least of all the banal. Nothing is so “unreadable” that it will not find its literate defenders. Such experiments have been performed before without begging the writer’s apologetic elucidations. Critics today need to feel the writer had reason for what they did, reason to innovate, reason to be daring. Writers, for their part, are only too happy to oblige. Innovation is after all so important, and no one can say in advance and with authority what is really new. And daring counts for so much more in a risk-averse society. Critics are easily impressed by innovation and daring amidst mountains of pap. When they buy the reason, the creative intent, and see the work as new and/or bold, they can be persuaded to like everything about it. If, however, they are not, the public will be up in arms, and that will be the end of them—these posturing criticasters!

§ Stranger than Fiction

There are ideas born of a powerless but overexcited brain solely to fill the emptiness of melancholy. Something nearly always comes of these improbable schemes—a fact that appears stranger than fiction, if we remember that in fiction the improbable is presented as fact.

§ Prise d’abyme

When we remark reprovingly “So-and-so acts like a character in a novel,” we are essentially saying we prefer their imagination contained. The mise en abyme of fiction can be as infinite as they come, but turned outwards it becomes a vacuum that threatens to swallow whatever is left of “reality.”
No Outstanding Work

*nulle œuvre en suspens*

*qu’ils ne souffrent pas et que je souffre, non pas seulement dans l’esprit, mais dans la chair et dans mon âme de tous les jours*

(that they do not suffer and that I do, not only in my mind, but in my flesh, and in my everyday soul)

—Antonin Artaud to Jacques Rivière (1924)*

Do I, the young poet asked the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, have the right to think (**le droit de continuer à penser**), the right to speak? The work he had sent in was not the result of inspiration but of spiritual jolts (**saccades**) that tear the words to shreds (**lambeaux**). Salvaged from the void, wrenched from chaos and composed in this ruined state as best he could, primitive to the extreme. *Et cependant je ne suis pas bête*, and yet I am not dumb, not beastly. He demurs: you are judging my work by today’s standards; judge me instead by those that are absolute (**du point de vue de l’absolu**). What is art other than this wrestling of a soul from the absolute darkness that reigns in man’s breast, man’s skull; what standards **other than absolute ones** can be brought to this human art without doing to it a civilized form of violence?

Rivière is, understandably, fascinated. He gradually comes around to seeing this writer, who has no work on him he hasn’t shared, no work on standby, as an exception to the droves of poets who have always, on a backburner, some uninspired something or other, fanning the flames of their mind instead of putting them out. He reads Artaud’s

---

* For the first fragment, the full sentence reads: “Voilà encore pourquoi je vous ai dit que je n’avais rien, *nulle œuvre en suspens*, les quelques choses que je vous ai présentées constituant les lambeaux que j’ai pu regagner sur le néant complet.”
difference from the *phenomenon of the age* as it asks to be read: as a true illness (*une véritable maladie*) and, as such, a sign of *authenticity*, touching the *essence of being, the very cry of life*. Artaud’s near-indifference to the *literary plane*, to *literature properly speaking* (that weak, self-obsessed *phénomène d’époque*) guarantees his sanity and literary sainthood. Having thus gone *below to gaze at the underside of art*, at his correspondent’s *deep and private misery*, Rivière comes up not with a better appreciation of Artaud, but with Artaud-as-principle: *One must be no longer able to move, to believe, in order to perceive*. The source of timeless art is utter desiccation. Absolute judgment is cruel only to those who do not suffer.

§ **Outpatients**

*Today’s literature: prescriptions written by patients.*

—Karl Kraus (first half of the 20th century)*

The writer of yesteryear was the kind of patient clever enough to self-medicate and not listen to doctors’ orders. Today, those same doctors, who go by the name of critics, save him from hospitalization. He is good as long as he takes his medicine, which he can only get as an outpatient. He takes what they give him; he writes what they tell him to. But this prescription-writing must not be confused with a *cure*. It merely ensures his survival.

Poetry of Genocide

in response to:

Let us not console ourselves with the thought that these were unsophisticated Africans, without the mental capacity to know better: in short, mere savages. Again, I do not know how much Hatzfeld has edited their words, but his perpetrator interlocutors seem to me more articulate than most of the people with whom I have had to deal in Britain as patients over the last decade and a half. Indeed, their language occasionally becomes poetic: though poetic language in this circumstance is mere euphemism.

Besides, the few comments of the survivors, mostly women, that Hatzfeld inserts into the text, are of considerable moral and intellectual sophistication, and certainly not those of unreflecting primitives with few powers of cerebration.

—Theodore Dalrymple, “On Evil”*

Euphemistic language is here openly deployed to describe — what? The speech of the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. It compares favourably for Dalrymple with British psychiatric and prison patients, a flattering reference group *eo ipso*, which is to say beneath contempt. These machete-wielding butchers are *not* primitives, an assurance aimed at the presupposition that evil is stupid, and African evil so stupid it practically babbles. These savages are not just outspoken, articulate; they have the makings of poets. The choice of euphemism seems deliberate: *poetry, poetic language*. Before we know it, it is withdrawn.

Given the context, almost any word other than *poetic* would seem less incongruous. Is it ironic, this gratuitous comparison? Is it provocation by allusion? So there *is* poetry fresh after a genocide?

---

The more distant the event, the more it lends itself to the poetics of events, to aestheticization and romanticization, provided we like our art morally neutral. Witness the willing artistic cooperation of Suharto’s henchmen in the inimitable *Act of Killing* (2013), a filmic reenactment of forgotten crimes. To call that poetry would likewise be euphemistic. Yet we cannot call it anything else. We have been seduced. It is always so with beauty’s pact with evil.

§ Art / Barbarism

*Unfortunately, I have a bad feeling that a huge and horrible crime happened, and the masterpieces were destroyed. If so, it would be a barbarian crime against humanity.*

—Ernest Oberländer-Târnoveanu, director of Romania’s National History Museum, on the incineration of seven masterpieces stolen in 2012 from the Rotterdam Kunsthall

A mother’s love burns brightest when the fuel is artifice, plastic slippers, and firewood. Art’s demise revealed the truth and power of the human heart. *Veritas, victoria, vita!*

The museum, the village, the abandoned house, the churchyard, finally the stove. Ash. Between the theft, the son’s arrest, the mother’s actions, and the art world itself (fearing the worst), the works were everything: a fortune, incriminating evidence, an irreparable loss. To the rest of us it was a crying shame. Before the lab’s findings sank in, the works were missed, their worth contained by the smouldering hope of their recovery, the story still too bizarre to be believed (especially after the mother’s retraction of the crucial part of it). After they were announced, the works became priceless, and their immolation, indefensible, beyond the pale. Here there is no why. We are survivors, bearing the burden of incomprehension. Incomprehension not of the
human spirit, for the mother’s act was as mindless as the can of worms it opened.

Nor was it a crucible of love—that mother was no art lover! It involved no test, no inner conflict of values, one love against another fighting in a breast, with a mother’s love finally getting the better of the universal love of beauty.

*Burn the evidence!* was the obvious thing to do. Not: *I must sacrifice the Art!* (We would prefer she turn in the works along with the son, but what mother would do that?—it is as unfeasible now as it was in biblical times.) A simpleton cannot be demonic. There was no question of zeal, of enthusiasm, of erotic arousal: *Burn, Picasso! Burn, Matisse!* And yet it used to be witches who stoked fire only to perish by it in those barbaric times. The innocence of the paintings, the Eastern European location, the poverty, illiteracy perhaps—all this makes for a credible latter-day hex.

And that is why, in a rush of blood to the head, we might blurt out “Crime against humanity!” The well-worn phrase—where the “crime” in question is nothing less than intentional degradation of human beings perpetrated on a large scale—seems hyperbolic in the new context, even if in the heat of indignation (to which destruction by fire certainly added fuel), we refuse to see it as just a metaphor.

The leap from humans to the human is easier the more the art of the recent past, when there were still masters worth mentioning, is sanctified as the expression of the human spirit, the quiddity of our dignity that protects us, like a magic circle, against all barbarism.

Art *appreciation* is an order of magnitude greater than art’s *invaluable*. The inestimable worth of art—of man—in our time requires the language of genocide to do justice to it. It is no “mere rhetoric,” but an unedited lament for humanity.

If, then, it strikes some of us as preposterous to call an art heist a “crime against humanity,” it must be because we do not value art as an extension of human dignity. Is it because art has always accompanied barbarity, as its counterpoint? Our whole history is constructed on denying that we cannot have the one without the other, even if art was born among the barbarians. The twisted story of the burglary,
the brutalization of these works, brings this twisted history, begun in prehistory, to a head. Acts we would consider barbarous now, or that we will consider barbarous in the future, were perpetrated by those we now consider to have been the first artists, even the first “moderns.” The stature of barbarity keeps step with that of art. The more invaluable art becomes, the less we can appreciate it. The more invaluable individual life becomes, the less we can appreciate it.

We might not know it, but such wisdom speaks through our condemnation of Oberländer-Târnoveanu’s hyperbole. To accept it would mean convincing ourselves that a mother’s love counts for nothing, that it is worthless. You cannot make the willful destruction of high art level with the annihilation of people without elevating at least one mother’s love to barbarism.

Even if the crude destruction of these Magnificent Seven really was atrocious, some more refined method would have been easier to swallow. Its artfulness would mitigate its vulgarity. That is why we hope she did not burn them but, as unlikely as that is, deceived the analysts. Perhaps then her act would qualify as art, a performance without spectacle, with an audience to come. It’s been said—I know the man who said it—that “Barbarity is one of the signs in which one recognizes renaissances of the spirit.”

§ Under Attack

The avant-garde artist was born of the image-breaker: the “icons” he broke belonged to his predecessors and rivals. In truth, however, they were the icons by which he lived his life and with which the art of his time was in agreement. His target, then, must not have been the artistic tradition, at least not directly; it was, rather, the reality sanctioning only images that flatter it—images that, while innocent, were thoroughly in the pay of wealthy patrons, who surrounded themselves with them as with mirrors. Naturally, the control of images made them structurally incapable of fulfilling art’s modern mission—to challenge, to unsettle, to open up. Only from the position of exteriority claimed by modern art can the false beauties of the life of privilege, of the dream life of power, be violated. Modernity’s artistic frontier is inward, advancing towards, not away from, the pieties and powers—political, economic, theological— with which even the old masters were in conformity. The image broken by the modern iconoclast, the icon reduced to shards and rags, is, in short, the spurious coherent whole, with the “art world” nestled in it.

§ Page from the History of Cultural Warfare

Like the military formation from which it takes its name, the avant-garde is not only the most advanced pioneering culture, but also the most exposed, the most radical in its methods, and too often the first to fall in the field.
§ Art, Alienation, Extinction

There is a received and much cherished idea that creativity cannot be alienating. Alienation befalls the exploited, their labour as mindless as it is repetitive, whereas creative work, where it is not enabled by higher economic standing, the prerogative of leisure, is mythologized as an escape into pleasure (even at the risk of madness or early death). Artists of course do collaborate, make, market, and sell their stuff, and the identity of the artist is perfectly compatible with that of the precarious worker or capitalist. But the neoliberalization of art is seen as incomplete as long as art is civilized by the triumph of form over content; form acts as a bulwark against the neoliberal civilization, whose watchword is content extraction. Capitalism keeps pace by producing the tools needed to extract content from form, funding art’s nonconformism. The creation of educational and other institutions that teach both art and its exploitation, as well as the rewards dangled before artists who defend art’s bulwark, keep up demand for aesthetic product. At a time when everything is being turned into a resource, art can still set the terms of its own use.

A reboot of art’s political-interventionist ferment in the 1960s and ’70s would offer no resistance to neoliberalism’s encroachment. The identity of the artist has since become much purer, much more abstract and—dare we say?—superfluous than in those days. All is well as long as it’s understood as just an identity or mask, and moreover, one among several others in competition or cooperation with it. Now that the “Creative Class” has been ideologically defined as vital for urban economies, the “creative subject,” a.k.a. artist, risks not alienation but isolation. With lived experience becoming art’s final court, whoever identifies with art to the exclusion of other roles—whoever lives and breathes art and otherwise lives not—must die of loneliness as one of the last surviving members of a species too old to reproduce.
§ Down and Dirty

If art really needs a clean slate, then life must have the opposite. But could we appreciate such art from such a life?

§ Scenes of Abduction

In the story of the rape of Hippodamia, a Lapith woman is saved from the clutches of drunken Centaurs, guests at her wedding feast. The oft-treated motif, allegorized as the struggle between bestiality or barbarism and humanity or civilization, ends quite clearly in the latter’s triumph. As with other erotic subjects, mythical or legendary scenes of abduction, depictions of lecherous violence and abuse, were long bound to a higher, moral purpose, while heroism and procreation as pretexts for titillation were deemed unworthy of art.

The sublimation called art is still aligned with nobility and morality. Art does not just represent—and that in two senses, of showing and standing for—the struggle against barbarism; it functions as a talisman. The choice and proper framing of scenes of this struggle fulfill art’s civilizing mission, contributing head-on to the mastery over monstrosity, ugliness, and evil looming large. The mission’s goal was to impress upon our minds the seriousness and high stakes of the fight for, in this case, sexual entitlement. The artist wanted us to know, none too subtly, that he had done his part.

The “Manichean” framework, which demands explicitness, comes at a cost to art, which is accused of speaking from both sides of its mouth. One the one hand, bringing sexuality to the surface and manipulating it make artists complicit in subduing anarchic forces—including the eternal two-way traffic between the normal and the freakish, the familiar and the foreign. Art renounces pornography less for its content and effect than for subordinating such forces to quantitative
self-regulation. On the other hand, as soon as the image becomes explicit, art falls under suspicion by priests and secular moralists of colluding with base desire. It is watched more closely and interpreted less charitably; exposed, it presents an easy target for yesterday’s orthodoxies. Doubt in its ability to quell insurgent passions makes conspicuous not what is obvious to us—art’s neutrality—but its barely hidden “barbarism.”

The long-term consequences of this double-bind are still with us: even now, freed from moral service, sexuality in art is dismissed as gimmickry, gratuitous provocation. Its aesthetic value is dubious; it is still too caught up in proving it has one. Its appearance is stiff, unnatural, in a word, unfree—and this in spite of the space given to it, having spread from canvas to celluloid, where it is occasionally even unsimulated. Its real, scrambled message is only intelligible to those who reject moralism of any kind and recognize art’s long struggle for a pagan origin.

Where it does not eradicate unruliness, censorship inspires encryption. In this hostage hermeneutic, sexually charged representations like that of Hippodamia’s rape, as they recur from the Renaissance on, are coded signs of distress. Rather than hailing the victory of the good through art, hence of “good” art, they signal art’s capture by “goodness.”

‡ Coming Clean

If life really is a blank slate, then art must be the opposite.
§ Red Is the Colour of Attention

Red is for sound reasons the most powerful of chromatic cues for attention. It makes sense to think of it as the starting point from which human colour consciousness gradually expanded.

—Julian Bell, “Seeing the Light”*

A Do you figure there is more red in the world now than there was, say, 300 years ago?

B Of course, because of printing and plastics.

A But is there more lust, more anger, more violence? Weren’t we once redder in the face and more openly into bloodshed, as some thinkers would have us believe? Red is also the colour of wine and the setting sun. Do we like them more than spilling and seeing blood? (And how far back does haemophobia actually go?)

B Now there is more love—that is its own shade of red. But love hates distractions.

A Love is ambivalent. It spills over into lust, anger, and violence, which attract more attention.

B Wait, but aren’t lust, anger, etc. ambivalent also?

A They are. They just silence their mixed feelings more effectively. They like the attention.

§ Ur-Colour

Great works wait.
—Theodor W. Adorno

The first extant works are in ochre—perhaps to stand out, and be attended to. They have waited for this a very long time.

§ Art (Theory) Brut

Caves containing prehistoric art have opened our eyes not just to the oldest known artwork, but to the Urbild of art: the outline of a human hand in ochre done by firelight. From it leads the long and dark passage to the image as we know it: from this negative of a hand held against a wall, on past the contour of an invisible hand and its silhouette, all the way down (or up) to the articulated figure bursting with colour in broadest daylight. But the primitive stencil, followed by the application of the hand to depiction, followed by the pictorial trace of what’s behind the depicting and tracing—these were, respectively, the view, the technique, and the principle of art from the very beginning.

Withdrawning

As drawing and painting are phased out in art schools, the concept of art moves some distance towards its ultimate form, that of *mental image*.

Et remotissima prope

The *Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power* by Pietro da Cortona (1633–1639) graces a ceiling in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome (now home to the National Gallery of Ancient Art). Developing the illusionistic technique of *sotto in sù*, it seems to open the lid of the great hall to the sky above it, at which we are meant to marvel, as the name suggests, from below.

But the heavens teem with activity, barely left uncovered by Cortona’s fear of empty space. Dynamic, floating human figures vie for room with a swarm of honey-coloured bees almost the size of nearby *putti* helping to hold aloft two crossed papal keys. On account of their dimensions and bodily independence, these bees appear either as giants or as existing on a different visual plane, much closer to the viewer and the floor. Their heraldic significance for the Barberini family required that it be one of the two: if painted to scale, they would, at such a distance, be mere specks. The span and busyness, the seeming mass and depth of this remarkable composition, are enough to induce an upside-down vertigo, with some elements set so high above the simulated frame as to be partly out of sight, and others so close or precariously suspended that they threaten to fall at any moment, bringing the whole pandemonium down with them, causing at least one modern visitor to cower and take shelter in the hallway. The power of the illusion is unfailing, but its effect on a more minimalist sensibility, pursued by *horror pleni*, is to induce flight.
Amidst the splendour of palaces, mansions, galleries, and basilicas, marble adds a mere accent to the art, the instruments of art, and the instruments of worship already assembled within them. It stands out only in impoverished and stripped surroundings, where it can be admired or exposed as false. The fate of marmi finti, once their deception is revealed, is not unlike that of artificial flowers: the disabused look is withering. Their placement is therefore crucial: far enough away from the eyes still capable of appreciating from a distance—no, not their art, not their naturalness, but their artful nature.

But does not all art ask to be admired in this way? To be regarded from a distance? Not merely some art, which requires us to stand back to compose itself into a meaningful whole (Seurat, Richter) or work its effect on our perception (Holbein, Rothko). Aren’t we taught to find each work’s “optimal viewing distance” (often also the “creator’s distance”), whether for painting or sculpture, so that its artifice, the extent to which its material had been worked, may not stare us in the face? We are already not fooled, and know that any closer we would find the artfulness not only more immediate but glaring. We spare ourselves these disillusionments by keeping back, perhaps even thank the institution for sliding between us barriers and layers of glass.

Fake marble, however, we approach naively: it can look so real. On closer examination, the pastel hues and delicate veins, however, disintegrate into a hodgepodge of ungainly strokes. Art as deception—whether, as here, in its content’s reality-effect or also by its beauty-effect—can only lose by such proximity. Mimetic art that abjures deception conceals its artifice much better, even at close range. But well enough to hold up under scrutiny? In what presents itself as a work of art, artifice is not exposed as trickery but studied as technique, for the achievement of beauty, realism, etc. The trompe l’œil, even when upfront and subtle—like the false windows of certain houses—is judged principally on its ability to create and sustain an illusion in three dimensions.
That is why the *marbled* loudspeakers in St. Peter’s—surprise may be the best spur to new reflection—are just right. Placed at a remove necessary to admire their stony skin, which, by reason only of its adherence to sound equipment suspended above our heads, should be presumed faux, without being so obviously. Far from a lower art form, the “speaking” *marmi finti* are for those rare, true seekers after aesthetic pleasure, those who having absorbed everything else—all the sumptuous, show-stopping objects and eye-catching detail—are still not sated. They blend seamlessly with the true marble no less than with the *obviously* sham; we would be forgiven for seeing their coat as mere camouflage against the enemies of modernity, whose devotion to tradition they offend in league with electric votive candles and cash registers. The harmony to which the speakers are party extends in this sense beyond music. Sleek, discreet, they do not draw our attention like the Baroque baldachin by Bernini—whose story, in keeping with tradition, is by comparison quite uncivilized. What isn’t done for the sake of ostentatious beauty? The damnable procurement of bronze for Bernini’s honeyed pièce de résistance by a Barberini, who was then pope, was summed up in one line: *Quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barberini*, “What the barbarians did not do, the Barberini did.” It was thought the material had been torn out of the Pantheon.
§ Unvarnished

Carl Dreyer, old master of the motion picture, would only have “artifice to strip artifice of artifice,”* instead of concealing it. This seemingly minor difference gains importance once we understand that the new layer of artifice is not a fresh coat of varnish that covers over old imperfections (exposing the natural as mere finish), but a stripping agent that brings out the grain of wood already laid bare by a saw.

* Quoted in Eileen Myles, “What about Chris?”, foreword to I Love Dick by Chris Kraus (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2006), 13.
§ It’s Alive!

Particularly salutary is the way [Amy Knight] Powell challenges the basic mission of art history “as a humanistic discipline” as laid down by Panofsky seventy years ago: that of “enlivening what otherwise would remain dead.” “Neither institution nor individual can restore life to an object that never had it,” Powell retorts. “The promiscuity of the work of art — its return, reiteration and perpetuation beyond its original moment — is the surest sign it never lived.” This refusal to animate, even to anthropomorphise, the artwork is especially pertinent given the tendency today to treat images and objects as though they were alive, even human: a fetishism of the artefact in art history that is in keeping with the fetishism of “personal devices” in the commodity world around us.

—Hal Foster

The first paintings were “animate.” In the Chauvet cave, early artists rendered bison in motion by multiplying their limbs. In the caves of Arcy-sur-Cure, a bear carries in its mouth a fresh fish, tail flapping. A bison speared by a hunter is still bleeding to death. A stampede of horses, large and small, close and distant, layered one over another, still run like the wind across the rock walls. But the artists did not succeed in breathing life into them. Instead, though dead and deep in stone, the works brought the artists back to life. We have never animated art. Art has always only animated us.

§ Virtual Promiscuity

in response to:

In this respect Powell regards the deposition of the work of art—in her case, its removal from the late medieval church to the modern museum—not as a deracination always to be deplored, as it is almost always seen today (so much do we take the value of contextualism for granted). Rather, in a manner that recalls the “imaginary museum” of André Malraux, Powell sees this displacement almost as a desideratum, for it opens up works of art to formal comparisons and conceptual connections that would otherwise be difficult to make. Indeed, she champions the “promiscuity” of artworks in the modern museum, “which is precisely what most art historians would rather overlook,” against the historicity that ties each work to its particular time and space of emergence, which is precisely what most art historians aim to articulate.

—Foster*

Let artworks mingle in virtual brothels, where we can have them act out even our own aesthetic fantasies digitally. But retain the old maidens and consorts in their proper places, for they are not of our time, nor would they wish to be.

*Ibid.
§ This Will Kill That

occasioned by the SIAS Summer Institute 2013/14 “Scenes from the History of the Image: Reading Two Millennia of Conflict"

When you find yourself by some wrong turn in the midst of a crowd of tourists freshly deposited at some “sight,” whether Notre Dame Cathedral or the Kew Gardens in bloom, you could, like me, associate the flurry of handheld snaps with bees collecting pollen. Ah yes, you think to yourself as you reach for your mental notebook, the image-takers of this century may far outnumber the image-makers, but they are like the most industrious worker bee to the queen—subordinate. I dare you, however, to reflect further on this first impression: do we really still live amidst images waiting to be taken? Have we not been absorbed wholly by the image, drinking and drowning in it? We can view this as a change of paradigm from the imaging of idealism and mysticism (even though material) to the seeing of empiricism and naturalism (even though optically assisted or digital) to, now, the saving of virtualism (even though what was seen remains, there remains nothing to be seen).

But, lest you think this is all I’ve got, I’m not fooled by this newfound capacity of ours to save images to keep their effect on us under control. I mean to push you further. Is it no longer the case that, as Virginia Woolf’s diners surmised, we are

all eye? Do we [not] still preserve the capacity for drinking, eating, indeed becoming colour furled up in us, waiting proper conditions to develop? For as the rocks hide fossils, so we hide tigers, baboons, and perhaps insects, under our coats and hats. On first entering a picture gallery, whose stillness, warmth and seclusion from the perils of the street reproduce the conditions of the primeval forest, it often seems as if we reverted to the insect stage of our long life.

No, we are more hand than eye, and much more hands-on in our collecting. We no longer go to galleries just to stare and, like Woolf’s insects, become for the moment the thing we see. We go to take it away with us. Neither are we merely confined to the galleries like to a primeval forest. We suck and draw the image out of everything we see, as bees suck out honey—which they have made for their own eventual consumption—but much faster than it can be replaced. Compared to the images of it in existence, all the natural and cultural scenery has become faded, tired, flat, and hazy. We, the image-takers, have killed it.

§

Return of the Image

daguerreotype: “mirror with a memory” (O.W. Holmes)*

It is an extended moment, not an instant as in the great majority of photographs, that is preserved by a daguerreotype. But it is a moment in which movement, if it is not to obfuscate the object, must be minimal, so that time seems to stand still for the sitter. The preservation—in stillness, as though petrified—of the object lends it a stony presence, a gravity seldom achieved in any other medium. But this same stately object, even when visibly grounded, seems to hover like a holograph. This phantom is the material essence of appearance.

My relationship to the daguerreotype echoes the experience of those who, encountering photography for the first time, were reportedly terrified that it would carry off their souls. In our self-conscious and reflective age, this least mediated form of image-making, the “lost” art

of daguerreotypy, affords the same experience, but in reverse. We are wont to conceive of identity through mirrors, through media, so that we can hardly imagine a world without our image in it. But precisely because of this multiplication of documented appearances and the instantaneity of contemporary photographs, our images seem more like flat reproductions and poorly made fragments we ourselves increasingly come to resemble. The first thing the primitive daguerreotype does is pick up and bind these aspects together, restoring us to ourselves. We realize what we have lost in a life of everyday pictures, be these family snapshots, portraits from Sears, or the most advanced digital photographs. The second merit of a daguerreotype is to make us see ourselves differently, less distractedly, more steadily; to remind us of our persistence in the world, our individual effort to be. The mirrored plate draws in what is least fleeting in our demeanor; it is selective even about our “features.” Depending on the plane of focus, the camera gathers a wealth of detail from our person and binds it to the reflective surface, the way a florist ties a bouquet, somewhere out of sight, down the stem. The daguerreotype shows only the blossom.
What Did You Do in the Theatre?

These not “properly speaking” plays that nowadays go under the name of immersive theatre offer elaborate, spectator-centred interactive environments designed to produce unique experiences in members of a new kind of audience. They are only the most extravagant of a type of dramatic phenomenon that adds a new dimension to the unpredictability of the theatre, heightening it. The type includes also “installations” staged in a gallery and meant to elicit interaction with audience members under constrained conditions which, by eschewing their framing as a bounded “event” or “performance,” give us latitude to come and go virtually as we please. It includes, as well, encounters of a more defined duration in an existing site that may or may not be reserved for this purpose (e.g., an office building, a museum, or a street), where the spectator, solo or in a group, interacts with actors (not always identified as such) for whom the concept ultimately matters more than the execution—improvised or with a script so rudimentary as not to foreclose very individualized experiences. These choreographed encounters possess some dramatic cohesion and blur the line between make-believe and reality. Tino Sehgal’s so-called “constructed situations” can be cited as examples of both types.

Immersive theatre is the next generation of this revolution in the theatre. It has been likened to active voyeurism (in which one seeks out occasions to watch without being seen), to video games in which players move through a world unto itself (without fundamentally affecting its rules or construction), and, finally and more distantly, to “choose your own adventure” fiction. These phenomena are translated by it into a new medium. The spectator who wanders through the artificial environment set up for a series of parallel performances—with multiple intersecting narratives that hang together while unfolding seemingly independently of one another—encounters not only these, of course, but also other (clearly identifiable) spectators. This structure itself allows the spectator to proceed at his/her own pace, to wander and become lost in the alternate reality of the piece.
But it also forces one to choose. Such active immersiveness makes demands on us precisely where we are habituated to being passive and not immersed. It requires us to work for a return on our investment, to get the “bang for our buck.” The bang is not a given—but neither is it in a regular show, even when the reviews are rave. It, however, hangs entirely on our rising to a new level of engagement, with and within the charged space into which we are let loose—not to mention on our individual luck once inside, insofar as we may or may not stumble upon a spectacular moment, finding ourselves in the right place at the right time to witness it. We are required to play along to reap more benefits, in search of experiences that will be ours and ours alone. The pressure to work hard on our own behalf is real, and it is on as soon as we step into the world of the play. And so the question “What did you do in the theatre?” could soon make us uncomfortable in a way that “What did you think of the play?” would not.
The Mask-Produced Spectator; or, Drowning in the Theatre

As in student-centred learning, the success of the immersive drama (or dramatic cluster) depends on its ability to generate unique and memorable experiences, and to lure its spectators back with its promise of different experiences within the framework of the same production. Immersive spectacles’ connections to other cultural artifacts (voyeurism, video games, gamebooks) speak less to the power of such spectacles to forge alliances and hence their cultural prominence than to their lateness and power of cultural synthesis, also a form of cultural reflection.

Immersive spectatorship has also been likened—perhaps most plausibly—to what being inside a movie (and not merely on a movie set) might feel like. This sense was literalized for the several hundred audience members milling around the fictional studio “Temple Pictures” in the Punchdrunk/Royal National Theatre mega-production “The Drowned Man.” The experience of the viewer approaches, quite deliberately (if the profuse intertextuality is any indication), participating in the diegesis, or story-space, of a film, an experience complete not just with the possibility of interacting with its elements and (apparently) influencing its events, but with “real” freedom in doing so, without, however, actually co-determining and sharing responsibility for what happens. Indeed, the structure must be fixed and robust enough to prevent the feeling that the show is for us only, or depends on our behaviour, action, or interaction in any way.

The importance of this for the audience goes beyond the simple fact that the truth of an illusion rests on the latter’s independence from us. It reflects the reality of our social disempowerment and alienation, which the obligatory masks worn by—surprise!—the spectators do much to intensify. One could also add into the mix some putative existential weakness, a shrinking from responsibility and radical freedom. Human interaction in immersive theatre thus happens primarily on the actors’ terms and at their whim, within what seem like strict parameters and algorithmic
scripts, heightening the overall sense of the unexpected (the stories of individual spectators’ private moments with actors further reinforce this impression of indeterminacy). There is just enough of a margin for manipulating inanimate objects to establish a reality from which all spontaneity has been sucked out. The temptation to touch and displace, to which viewers succumb seen and unseen — though the feeling of being watched never really leaves them — is one that the mise-en-scène itself seems destined to encourage by the distribution of a dizzying array of props in vacant lots through which a performance has not yet or already swept. Nonetheless, the sense of transgression when interacting with even these things, while it may have something to do with respect for the show’s integrity, reveals on another register the parlous condition of agency, which interactive mass art bends over backwards to conceal.

Only through such finely composed and balanced schemes can the reality created become convincing as a world — a vast playground for spectatorship as sexless voyeurism. The “peeping” must be made especially safe and uncontroversial, since it is indulged neither in private nor through “keyholes” or two-way mirrors. This permissive atmosphere relies not only on total audience absorption in the created environment and action (this to prevent mischief and straying), and not only on a carefully curated sense of abstraction from the reality as it unfolds — preventing viewer-initiated interaction, and facilitated by the anonymizing, defacing, interposing, and cloistering powers of the mask — but also on viewer protection from the dramatis personae and co-voyeurs, in which the flatness and homogeneity of the masks, their privacy-bestowing power (concealment of reaction), again play a leading role.

The mask returns to the theatre with the advent of a masked audience. In the above-named production, it is a white visor, void of expression, recalling not only the Venetian carnival but also the beaked plague doctor and the classic alien. The prop thus points in three disparate directions: the ancient dawn of the theatre, protection from inexplicable
death, and a future in which our terrestrial entertainments will be completely incomprehensible.

One can only wonder at the experience of the actors in this drama when confronted with the blank uniformity of the crowd. The experience must at first be as alienating for them as it is for us. To gauge our reaction, they must unlearn the habit of relying on facial cues and instead read our movements. Though we are perhaps more watched, and surely more monitored for possible vandalism, we have, in truth, neither the time nor even the thought to reflect on the thespian “other side” of theatrical immersion; our mask—identical to the others and quite comfortable to wear—gives us a tangible feeling of invisibility little different, on the face of it, from that in an auditorium after the lights have gone down. Far from counteracting immersiveness, the disguise separates and awakens us, as ciphers, to the strangeness of simultaneous immersion and isolation—a feeling spared the non-immersive spectator. Our sense of and desire for complete immersion draws us into an unfamiliar reality. The totality of the illusion plunges us, once the first rush of curiosity has been satisfied and the character of the diversion cognized, into a state of solitude, silence, and mystery—of others as much as ourselves.
Fatal Attraction

*Cultural history has a well-known name for this partial disavowal of social situatedness, a simultaneous impulse to veil the mystery of how artists and writers manage to get themselves provided for and to offer that mystery as a sort of tourist attraction.*

—Bruce Robbins

If Van Gogh’s ear went on display, we would go to see it. The torment of genius, mental illness, the yellow house, fraternity, dashed dream of artistic community, a fainting prostitute, Ichthus/ictus, self-portrait with bandaged head, self-mutilation with suicide—the ear evokes all of them. It is the clue, the main exhibit, the source of a mystery.

If the ear was on tour, crowds would come to see some sliced-off flesh. We would be warned not to expect anything sizeable; he lost only the lobe, just a tiny bit. We would be told of the artist’s inability to accept provisions, of money, friendship, and appreciation, and of his growing social isolation. How he lived and worked would interest us little. Van Gogh’s art seems conditional on defying his state and situation; it thrived on maladjustment despite his desperate efforts to counteract it. In the end, the ear would become part of Van Gogh’s body of work, at the head of the *catalogue raisonné*. It already stands for the whole of his art—not his life, which had to be sacrificed.

Until we take the waxen ear between our fingers and consider reattaching it to the waxwork figure of Van Gogh, we will lag behind theories of embodied art-production that threaten to pull him down to earth by his remaining ear.

---

§ *Pentimenti*

pentimento: *sign or trace of an alteration in a literary or artistic work; (spec. in Painting) visible trace of a mistake or an earlier composition seen through later layers of paint on a canvas* (OED)

A masterpiece is not the product of changes of mind — of attempts, perhaps, of trials and errors to be sure, but not of fundamental shifts in conception. No, that would be too underhanded. Style and design alone do not a masterpiece make, though they do count for innovation. They can be “worked on.” But the flash of genius, the “ah!” in awe, no amount of wavering, backpedalling and fudging can generate. Now, let’s consider the matter again: could the great work emerge from draft upon botched draft, repeated efforts, false starts? No genius should have to put up with such self-evident ineptitude. It would know when to stop spinning its wheels and recognize that only a fundamental conceptual shift can masterfully match new style to design, and design to execution. Ambivalence on this point is surely why we find the *pentimenti* of great works particularly captivating. *Could it be thus?* we wonder incredulously before we accept that indeed it was — an exception to the rule. But when we look back at those “ruly” masterpieces — those conceived *once*, carried out, and meant to be — we cannot help but think less of them: effortlessly devised, without a trace of hesitation, only the labour of execution, the single-minded stubbornness of living up to their original perfection in the artist’s mind. *Is that really all it takes?*
Great Passion

Only make sure passion is in the ascendant before beginning anything like the re-creation of the world through art. Strike while your iron is hot. There will be time for coolness and sobriety—for refining your work by the pale light of day, making hay (or hash!) of it with the sun still shining. If, instead, against your powers, you get composing, your ink will be invisible, white on white, and you yourself, as good as blind. When, come evening, in the throes of inspiration, you hold your page above a flame, you will be dismayed. If you then refine your scribbles by the light of your passion—leaving it untended, not trimming your wick—your markings will again be illegible, black on soot-black. And when the day dawns once more, you will find everything burnt to a crisp, your face ashen.

Instrument of Instruments

The production of a perfected illusion depends not only on a staggering artistic skill but ultimately on the intuitive steering of a breathless state in which the painter himself no longer knows whether his eye still sees and his hand still moves.

—W.G. Sebald

Our habitual focus when considering creative works is on the idea and its execution, or technique. This focus develops in response to our experience of them: interpretation leads us to the idea, consideration of its mode of unfolding, to

technique. From the perspective of evaluation, technique can compensate for a weak idea, but a powerful idea, rarely make up for poor technique.

It is the schools of writing — specifically of the creative, literary kind — that offer the best example of the simultaneous indispensability and worthlessness of technical instruction for creative talent today. On the one hand, workshopping and editing manuscripts is the necessary banausic side of creativity. Industry standards must be learned and certified for the eventual product to sell. On the other hand — and here is the worthless column in the ledger — cultural wealth is created by one’s capital investment, not by years of master-less apprenticeship.

The overwhelming majority of those who study writing are never recognized as authors but only as more or less skilled artisans. The remaining handful already possess all the essential elements, which group discussion and attention to detail merely refine — away from conformity. Despite their participation, and on account only of true talent setting them apart from their most capable peers, they have not demeaned themselves with workshopping. Their talent can be rehabilitated. Thus the indispensability of instruction and its worthlessness are balanced in the ledger of creative life, and no one is a born artist.

The more eroded the category of genius becomes, the more it finds shelter in the rare cases where talent lies not in compounding the benefits of technical instruction, but in hard work wherein such benefits are unimportant or hardly to be detected. Seeing the difference between excellence and genius, between the reducible and the irreducible, itself requires a non-technical sensibility and an artist’s “nose.” Among the untaught and unteachable skills that serve to illuminate it we can count the sense of completion: knowing exactly when to step back from a work. The great Greek painter Apelles stressed the value of this ability as his advantage over the greatest mastery of technique. At the inspired moment when he stopped his hand, that instrument of instruments, and took it away, his genius was most on display.
Yet those very people, who so hate genius, all consider themselves geniuses.

—Denis Diderot, Rameau’s Nephew

For the creative artist, it is hardest to steer between the evils of creative vanity when these are as attractive as two kinds of absolution.

On the one side, the artist meets, and even exceeds, his highest standard by producing a great work, while immediately falling short of it as a human being. When measured by it, he “breaks down,” ready “to surrender his overwhelming skill to God” (so Ernst Bloch, an atheist).† And so he surrenders his work, in a pathos of his unworthiness of it, to the only worthy creator — paying himself, in this roundabout way, the greatest compliment. His genius now belongs to the Heavens and redeems him. He is absolved of his failures, and of the vanity that drove him.

On the other side, the artist fails to live up to his highest standard, his work falling short of his great genius. No sooner is the work finalized (if not already abandoned) than it is condemned for being beneath him. He does a ritual purge: he burns it. “Only this kind of burnt offering might be acceptable to the Muse he has let down.”‡ By it he signals that much more can be expected of him — and, far from being impugned, he is vindicated.

---

§ Mirabile scriptu

In the modern novel from Naturalism through Symbolism to Modernism genius has long been at home—so comfortable in fact that it must be the secular stand-in for the whole class of miracles and supernatural events.

§ Genius and Truth

Many have pointed out that true genius is anathema to societies organized on the principle of equality. Either truth is available to all or it is available to no one—let’s not now add a *more or less*; these alternatives admit of no degrees. Searchers for truth have an obligation to share it whenever they come upon it and to keep it accessible. No one must be excluded from this unisex, one-size-fits-all, one-for-all-for-one kind of truth. Openness is the justification for its pursuit, and research, in the long run, is labour on behalf of all humanity rather than individual men and women.

When did this view of truth and genius come into its own? Why has the sharing of truth developed into a universal duty? The obvious answers are, respectively: around the time social inclusiveness became a thing, and for the betterment of everyone. Now all pay lip service to it while turning a billion blind eyes on its real effects. The money attached to sharing is not to be sneezed at, and works wonders as added incentive. Motivation exceeds individual admiration or national prestige. What has been definitively struck from this wishful wish-list is precisely what openly drove truth’s initiates as recently as this year: possession of power in order to dominate mankind. Domination works in the subtlest of ways, and securing agreement with any given truth, no matter how trivial, strengthens the position of its supplier—a process that builds everything from empires to cliques.
The creative genius, meanwhile, has never had an active role in this (take poor Prospero paradigmatically). The truth of genius was more than singular in expression; it was unique to him, yet \textit{causa sui}. The genius was not faulted for neglecting or failing to communicate it; he was not made for such things; the responsibility to make it known lay with everyone but him. His gift was to be both a lightning rod, which sheltered other men from too much truth, and a divining rod that only worked if undisturbed. His truth spoke not with the obviousness of black on white, but with the mystery of many shades and fathomless meanings.

The problem with the genius of old was not its power to deceive but its almost invariable elitism. Even if his was truth that bothered no one and that the rest could live without, its very possibility, rarity, exclusivity, or mediation fuelled resentment, eroding genius’s cult status as the manifestation of man’s divinity, and dimming its instances. Many of the Grimms’ tales tell of the desire, rooted in a greed of which their common man is typically innocent, to nip the exceptional in the bud.

Not long afterward, genius was redeemed as the emanation of the spirit of a people, having made itself understood intuitively by all as their common patrimony. It thrived in Germany, leading it to unification. (Italian nationalism was comparatively down-to-earth, organized around the liberal-corporatist metaphors of workshop and association.) Art, in the grip of Romanticism, became genius’s bulwark. For a while still, it split the difference between civilized society and barbarism. The artist-hero stood watch on the border between them, fervently (if often unsuccessfully) policed in the great era of nation-states. Exposed to the outside, genius was now in touch with the barbarian, the foreign, the wild, even while in the pay of the tribe it protected. Its rudeness eventually had to exceed, its cultivation never match, that of its patrons: the essence of the Bohemian stereotype. The reputation of genius followed that of the artist in its downward trajectory. While Arnold Schoenberg complained “there are no more geniuses, only critics,” and pushed back against philistinism, parochialism and populism in his creative
domain (“if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art”), the middle class was losing the last of its patience with “so-called genius,” which would find a safe haven in the philanthropist’s no-strings-attached “so-called Genius Grant.” Public fortune began instead to smile on science, whose truth could at least, it seemed, be understood by all with enough application.

Today, the term “genius” sticks to some people in much the way the name “Santa Claus” does to the neighbour who always volunteers for holiday duty. It denotes, in other words, no special gift for truth but a desire to amuse and, through a harmless deception transparent to all, to be seen as extraordinary year round as well. The older they grow, the more the children who once gathered around him come to regard him as infantile (and themselves as mature enough to judge!), even to whisper doubts about his sanity. Fortunately, in no time they also start replenishing his real fan base, which still believes (and so confirms) that he really is Santa Claus, really is a genius. Nature takes its course alongside the cycle of healthy disillusionment.

This brings us to the virtual disappearance of the epithet “genius,” in its robust sense, from all but the most rarefied circles, where large sums of money are exchanged. More than merely aware of his value, the artist knows how to capitalize on it, investing in his own aura and genius-myth that becomes then an integral part of the artistic product, rather than a quality he started off with.

There is also the freely available, seemingly effortless, good old “genius for.” “For” what, precisely? In principle anything—anything, that is, except truth.

---

Born originals, how comes it to pass that we die copies?
—Edward Young

Ape stands for “imitation,” man for “originality” at least in potentia. Before you lament your fall from ape to man, or man to ape (decide for heaven’s sake!), having betrayed either your natural innocence, or your creative potential, the ape not having shamed you back into native ignorance, or else into originality — remember (remember and rejoice!) that second nature is nature minus its imperfections, or that no two imitations are identical and that, compared to the really good ones, all originals are just unaccomplished copies.

§ Look No Further

It is barbaric indeed to hold that the content of a work of art is contained by covers or a frame. It is no more civilized to conceive the form of art as exceeding them. Both notions can be blamed on a modern superstition, one that recapitulates the history of art’s unfinished secularization, its incomplete emancipation “from the cultic to the cultural” (to borrow a phrase from Thomas Mann*). The first idea — content in form — stems from a hereditary fear of not recognizing divine presence in material reality unless the latter is transformed by the deity’s appearance. God’s presence need not be obvious and will be missed by those who look for it beyond what is in front of them. As for the second notion — form beyond form — we owe it to an inherited fear of not recognizing this same material reality as divine work, formed by God’s hand rather than man’s.

* Thomas Mann, Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuhn, as Told by a Friend, trans. John E. Woods (1947; New York: Vintage, 1999), 64.
§ Work of Exception

This work of art may have been made by your neighbour, but in it he seems a stranger.

§ Stranger in One’s Own Work

To be a stranger in one’s own house requires another to first make it uncomfortable. To be a stranger in one’s own work of art, also built with one’s own hands, requires the merest passage of time.

§ Abyss-Gazing

Modern music and literature devoted attention to “composing” silence, modern visual art, to manipulating negative space, film, to capturing stillness and *temps mort*. Staring too long into the abyss only familiarizes it.
Little Pieces

In the repetitive rhythms of primitive music the menacing aspect originates in the principle of order itself.
—Adorno*

Schoenberg’s “musical aphorisms” are too brief, too lean and nervy, too dematerialized, for rhythm and order to take root in them. The aphorism, the romantic fragment, the sketch, the kleines Stück, and a host of other diminutive artistic forms share a resistance to the spirit of system, whether the latter unfolds primarily in time, as it does for instance in music or literature (Bach, the Encyclopédie, regular utopia, Hegel), or in space, as in visual representation (perspective, classicism, Beaux-Arts). The freedom of art is best exercised, best “captured,” in small pieces; they let us come and go at will, without a key or address. They require no submission to creative force, no suspension of judgment or of disbelief. Rarely do they define the artist who produced them. In a society that rewards consistency and individualism, they assume the character of common property, if not its form, without (for this very reason) becoming common.

What disturbs us in them is born neither of the principle of order nor of order’s opposite. Indeed, it can only come from their suspension over a void of feeling and meaning—a void visible only if one gives their anti-systematic character its due, and invisible if one reads them negatively (as inchoate, undeveloped, unfinished, supplemental) in relation to some “principal” work. The extant lines of Heraclitus and Parmenides cannot but be read in this way: not merely against a relative void of our historical understanding, but in the absence of a more orderly, more complete textual background or accompaniment, and with the probability that what has come down are not just the remnant highlights of a lost whole, the spoors of a disappearance.

* Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 52.
In this respect, their small number has perennially taught amateurs of remote intellectual history the value of the shortest forms. But true love of these minimal pieces is never free of dread or disquiet. The more profound their appeal, the louder their expressive summons, the more archaic the surrounding silence of thought out of which they must forever keep emerging.

§ Beasts for Kicks

What literati and ideologue revolutionaries have in common is a willingness to descend to common beastliness for enlightened ends. Marmontel saw in men of letters “bêtes féroces destinées à l’amphithéâtre pour l’amusement des hommes.” In their zeal to instruct us by force, both groups realize too late that their shows require self-sacrifice to be, or do, any good.

§ Cannonball

The intriguing unfurnished room in René Magritte’s On the Threshold of Liberty (1929, 1937) could hardly be more transparent. But it is not the transparency of glass houses, unremarkable either way—whether one is looking in or out of them. (What is so remarkable, after all, about making

---

windows of walls, being able to see out at all angles and being visible at all times?) The transparency on display in the Magritte painting concerns not whatever might occur inside the room, but what might be called the images of the world of its (absent) inhabitants.

The walls of the room, to extrapolate from the one in full view—at which a cannon is pointed—are each subdivided into four squares. The squares frame images that show evidence of careful curation. Today, we might take them to be projections rather than painted panels, wallpaper, or incongruent windows onto the very subjects depicted in them, but their ontological status is of no consequence.

The images, from left to right, depict: a lush and dark forest, a rather painterly nude torso (the female midriff, to be precise), wooden boards, clouds against a blue sky, magnified grelots or sleigh bells, the façade of a townhouse (as it might be seen from across the street), a blazing fire, an enlarged paper doily pattern. Only three of these images would qualify as window material; the rest require alternate explanations. What do all these fragments have in common? What unites them? Or is their fragmentariness meant to point us in the direction of the titular “threshold”? One plausible interpretation is that these interior scenes make up the “image bank” of a typical bourgeois life. A hunger for images of reality unites nondescript middle-class interiors with prison cells. But while the repertoire of the second reflects its occupant’s unsated desire, the first is filled with reflections of everyday life, where small desires are no sooner felt than satisfied. The narrator of Voyage autour de ma chambre would be at home among them, not needing to cross the threshold to find his freedom.

To liberate the inmates of bourgeois life over a century after de Maistre’s sedentary journey around his room seems to require measures at once more radical and more absurd: heavy artillery positioned to blow the entire scheme to smithereens? The proposal for armed violence from within suggested by the aimed cannon, combined with the absence of a possible agent, has the effect of securing our assent: Yes, such life is a scandal! Nothing lives here! And before we know it,
we have exchanged our aesthetic perspective for that of the gunner.

§ Art Curation

Great art is defined by intractable personal flaws; great curation, by incurable personal traumas. It is unforgivable to theorize from a single example (our local collector-curato Ydessa Hendeles, whose work is heavy with her family’s fate in the Holocaust). So let us turn instead to one of the minor adventures of logos, a contemporary conceptual-linguistic dialectic.

_Curation_, its roots in Latin _cura_, is a kind of care. It is a response to a hurt in need of healing. While the idea of _curating_ private life, from social media to home base, inspires attention to more than just aesthetic detail, and may be worthwhile as self-therapy, we must resist seeing the curation of galleries and museums in this way. Why add art space to the many hoaxes perpetrated on ailing publics? Let us leave any putative health benefits of curation to the curator, and focus on the art—whose main mission is not to heal us spiritually and comfort the disturbed. No matter how well curated, its museums will not cure all who come. They may bring relief to those who come in desperation. To expect them to do so, however, is to burden them with a responsibility they can never take up. Phonetically the Louvre is not so far from Lourdes, where the “curators” alone similarly find relief. But it should guard itself against analogous public imposture to maintain itself as a site of pilgrimage.
§ Moratorium I

Art’s command to be revered, preserved, and on public display is nothing more than an extension of religion’s command for ritual prayer and temple worship. In those houses of God where devotional relics are stored to protect them from vandalism and decay—there they also take on a new “life,” paralleling their otherworldly truth, of reminding us of the afterlife (who can help wondering about the reliquary: surely there is more to death than this? The more wood and gold and precious metals cover these remnants, the less pesky our questioning).

Visual art, meanwhile, transforms this thought of finitude and the afterlife into one about metaphysical connection (the uncanny phenomenality of images, the sense of their being alive and autonomous, does not enter into the equation; once seen, they seem to perpetuate themselves just fine regardless of their physical condition, even to the point of awakening our iconoclastic side). Do we not find ourselves dumbstruck before artworks we had once seen in better shape, in real life or reproduction? Do we not wonder then: is there nothing more to them than this, after all? Owing to art’s widespread preservation and display, they maintain the privileged status of representatives of a higher order of being. That is quite a lot to live up to!

But in our time this metaphysical function is becoming less and less self-evident. With the ranks of artists continually swelling, exorbitant capital pouring into the art market, the democratization of canons, the relaxation of prohibitions, the globalization of long-held rumours about the end of art’s spiritual ascendant (can we blame it all on late-imperial decadence and technological promiscuity?), we may wonder whether the time has not perhaps come to rein in the public institutions of art and celebrate art’s ephemerality over that of the artist. This as long as we recognize that such a celebration is itself unlikely to go the way of all flesh and will remain after the art itself has left—as a record of its phenomenal and ontic experience.
No Trespassing

Certain let us call them “difficult” artists, in an access of vanity or insecurity, put into their work so much of themselves, featuring in it front and centre, that they actively get in the way of its appreciation. Since there is no getting around them, one must either come up close, too close (for comfort, taste, or hygiene), in order to lose sight of them— to disaggregate their input into digestible parts— or else move as far away as necessary to see the bigger picture. It is no use trying to push aside such art-makers; they will resist, turn hostile, and bar the way completely. They are so fond of it and protective that any attempt at bypassing will result in struggle, which can only harm the art.

As a viewer, one can always decide that such a degree of possessiveness and obtrusiveness disqualifies their work from public interest on the grounds that it mimics private property. For reasons to do with the history of art, the artist as art proprietor is one image that does not gel. The ego-underlining work, in contrast to the ego-undermining kind we all love by comparison, insists that appreciation of the artist (whose personality pervades it) is indispensable to its secrets being released. Open house begins as soon as our bonafide interest is established.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that what has us return again and again to a tough piece of art is a “connection” to its maker or a standing invitation to get to know them (and their work only through them). Stand back! Keep out! Approach no nearer!— these proprietary messages dissuade in vain, speaking most enticingly to the fan of the prohibitively difficult. As long as they remain interdictions, unbacked by action, they have the contrary effect. What greater incitement to curiosity and trouble than a No trespassing sign on property whose owner is home, property seemingly abandoned (as difficult works tend to be)? Where the rule-abiding peel off, preferring non-appreciation to offence, the adventurous see only the romance of transgression.
Rubens in Furs

In a collection of objects of art, the contiguity of beauty sets off the beautiful and that of inferiority detracts from it. A judge who is wearied, is incapable of judging: ennui renders him unjust and severe.

—Astolphe de Custine, *Letters from Russia*

Walking through the zones of heat and cold, across creaking floorboards—as in a rural museum opened just for you if a custodian with the key can be found, or in a mountain chalet when all the guests are out pursuing winter sports and only you, having been excused, wander looking at old photographs, natural artifacts, and undusted bits of folklore, or, again, in a European temple of art at whose grand doors a shivering trail of people awaits admission, thinking not of Rembrandt but of samovars.

The austerity of the display inside does a disservice to the museum’s collection. Old Masters hide in poor light, and plump Rubenses have long since turned with age. Everything here finds its antithesis in the vivacity of the wintertime queue. This takes on the habit of an autonomous entity, which snakes outside, its cheeks full of colour and body clad in fur, pooling together scarce resources (drink, warmth, humour) as in the days of the Siege of Leningrad. The Russian state, making no provision for these avid culture-seekers, prefers to see in them the contiguity of need and inferiority. And in this condition they must suffer to gain entrance to the visions of beauty.

Inside, the ghost of Empress Catherine still hovers in the atmosphere, waving her despotic finger, humbling visitors even further:

---

1. All ranks shall be left outside the doors, similarly hats, and particularly swords.
2. Orders of precedence and haughtiness, and anything of such like which might result from them, shall be left at the doors.
3. Be merry, but neither spoil nor break anything, nor indeed gnaw at anything.
4. Be seated, stand or walk as it best pleases you, regardless of others.
5. Speak with moderation and not too loudly, so that others present have not an earache or headache.
6. Argue without anger or passion.
7. Do not sigh or yawn, neither bore nor fatigue others.
8. ...  
9. Eat well of good things, but drink with moderation so that each should be able always to find his legs on leaving these doors. *

Look closer at this common humanity lined up before the State Hermitage in January snow. Do you not yourself prefer them to the contiguity of Dutch and Flemish masters on which restorers have not performed their sorely needed tasks? The picture of health and animal spirits takes here pride of place. Thus it is that near certain museums nature’s beauty can sometimes spring up.

* These were Catherine the Great’s “Rules for the Behaviour of All Those Entering These Doors.” Quoted in James Steward, The Collections of the Romanovs: European Art from the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (London: Merrell, 2005), 24.
Fake Fires

The confetti-spider crudeness of images of exploding fireworks offends no one as long as their subject matter makes no claim to art. Designing and engineering *feux d’artifice*, or pyrotechnics, was recognized as a distinct métier, that of the *artificier*, under Louis XIV, who was himself quite fond of elaborate early versions of *son et lumière*. An engraving of a show of this kind—one of the original senses of “set piece”—combined with its timely circulation, used to pose as an eyewitness rendering, recording the moment of explosion (it has been pointed out that some of these images depicted a synthesis rather than an actual scene, and often preceded the event, depicting it as planned rather than as executed, as it might have been rather than as it was, if it even was). The engraving’s artistic value was subordinated to its informative and propagandistic role.

All that changed with Whistler’s now-famous *Nocturnes in Black and Gold—The Falling Rocket* and *The Firewheel*. The first of these occasioned a libel case between the painter and the art critic John Ruskin, who had accused Whistler in print of “wilful imposture.” Ruskin’s vicious reaction can only be understood as motivated by the subject matter—man-made bursts of light meant for popular amusement—even if he focused on technique; the subject called for a technique more “reckless” than in Whistler’s earlier work. Whistler sued to defend his method and choice of subject, citing artistic maturity, influences (Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints) and, last but not least, modernity. In both *Nocturnes*, the transformation of sublimity—a combined effect of distance, vantage point, and sombre setting—is achieved with the insertion of the rocket and softening of impression in a spectral tonal harmony of night and fog broken by evocative specks and highlights.

The Florentine *Scoppio del Carro* on Easter Sunday is surely among the most spectacular traditional fireworks displays to have survived electrification. Among its wonders is the procession of the cart, resembling a juggernaut. Loaded with explosives, escorted by men and women in period dress, it is hauled through the streets by a team of oxen before coming to a halt in the square in front of the *duomo*, where it is ignited from within the cathedral by a fuse. The incredible concatenation set off to the clang of bells and lasting nearly half an hour is all the more remarkable for its compactness of means. Like a whirring demon on which all eyes are turned, the thing emits not just round after round of detonations but also billowing smoke, bringing back something of the barbarism of the Catholic Church’s distant past, as well as the terror of a volcanic eruption. Perhaps the visceral thrill of watching fireworks will one day ultimately be traced to the archaic boredom of savages around a fire.
Inscrutable Relation

Il n’y a pas d’œuvre d’art qui ne fasse pas appel à un peuple qui n’existe pas encore.

(There is no work of art that does not appeal to a people who do not yet exist.)

—Gilles Deleuze, “What Is the Creative Act?”*

One could quibble with the individual words—none? appeal? a people? not yet?—or one could say: There is no people that does not appeal to a work of art that does not yet exist. Every people conjures its own unity in art as in a crystal ball. This “fundamental affinity” of people for a future work of art that represents them is also “never clear,”† and fades from sight as the glass clouds over with their breath.

---

† Ibid.
Barbarogenesis

Imaginary interwar headline: *Europe Balkanized! The name of this grotesque hybrid: Barbarogenius, hero of early twentieth-century Serbian avant-garde, a Slavic New Man. This time it is not the universal spiritual qualities that renew and redeem European civilization in brotherly communion (as Dostoevsky prophesied), but crass primitivism raised to the higher power of a de-civilizing mission. “We advocate new and pure barbarism,” wrote the man behind it, Ljubomir Micić, founder of Zenitism, a self-proclaimed newer and purer avant-garde. Like Mayakovsky’s Ivan, personifying Soviet Russia as Wilson’s and Whitman’s challenger on American soil, the Barbarogenius, a hiccup of revolutionary intoxication and unspent virility, is Europe’s latter-day rapist and unlikely savior. Science and technology are instrumental in his onward-and-upward trajectory as well, and serve as its metaphors (he is a “rescue pilot of barbarian ideaplanes”). Rather than bearing reconciliation, this walking contradiction flies in the face of the rational West.

It seems like only yesterday that art (spirit) and barbarism (natural culture) were capable of such strategic alliances. The former would contain the brutality of cultural ferment without bursting from the buildup of inner pressure. The latter, meanwhile, drew from the East a primeval energy, heralding the art of the future.

§ Perfect State

In a perfect state, art, including literature, would disappear for lack of motivation; those with a lingering “desire for poetical unreality,” for the solace of art, long for the “imperfect state[,] of society still half barbaric”* in which we still live.

§ Letting Slide

We tend to think of literature as helping us make sense of experience, as making the world intelligible to us, and forget that its chief “function” today is the consolidation of culture, which throws in our way interminable contradictions while claiming wholeness and coherence. Literature’s less-than-confidence-inspiring integrative effect can be detected in the specious universals of the Literary Establishment and World Literature. Literature, and art more generally, is far and away the smoothest slide into a culture’s belly, where it does its enzymatic work. It gives us puzzles to wrap our heads around instead of grappling with contradictions.

Great Art Belonging to Everyone

In the Hollywood version of WWII’s Monuments Men, one of them, in words perhaps sentimental yet surprisingly resonant today, gives voice to a deep conviction: “great works of art can never belong to any one individual, at least not in spirit.”

Everyone has a right to enjoy masterpieces, and when that right is taken away, when the ruling taste outlawed what speaks to them, they will speak up to reclaim it. This is the view inculcated in school groups by museums, of which the nation-state is still the largest benefactor. The roots of “art as public good” run deep in Christian liturgy, a fact that supporters of the radical Enlightenment would rather we forget. The democratization of art appreciation (in contrast to that of religious faith by means of art) has been glacial, reformations and revolutions notwithstanding. It has pushed us into a full-blown contradiction, until now unpronounced.

The democratization of aesthetic opinion (and of educated taste, to be sure) underpins the great wave of entitlement felt before art, great and small, that washes over more people each year, and washes away sins for good. This is the entitlement to one’s own opinion and thus to the work’s meaning as it appears to us. What are the great works, anyway? Let’s cut them down to size and put up lesser lights instead; they will soon shine brighter. Even the cognoscenti of the world of art are bound to bow to public taste, if money calls their name. The rich to whom they pander are bound to lose interest in “high” art, which none below, more informed now than in past times, already gives a damn about. And this is true the more their ranks are replenished by this immense, unbuffered and rapidly self-educating “class,” and the more art’s “reputation” as a whole suffers (from throwing around its label to see where else it sticks). Mass disparagement of certain art—and it is difficult to predict which, as

* The Monuments Men, directed by George Clooney (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2014), DVD.
even difficult work finds aficionados in the unlikeliest of places—is only the most pernicious, if relatively rare, consequence, since some work remains too abstruse for popular taste to approach it. The more pervasive effect is the disappearance of recognized and rewarded artistic diversity the more the scale swings to just one side.

We are living now through the beginning of this aesthetic transformation, to which the concept of “great” art (already on life support) will eventually yield. “Greatness,” after all, implies that some work is qualitatively beneath the attention of the vast majority, its attention increasingly limited by time. The mid-range artists already find themselves stranded, and without means. Art schools go the way of humanistic studies, and the pool of untapped talent swells. Promise is pegged to potential for making big prize long and short lists, while money (to be sure, less and less of it) is staked on entries to popularity contests that loom large in the eyes of the world.

What we call art will continue being made, its diffusion likely greater than ever before, and everyone shall have contact with and opportunity to see it, if not to “contemplate” it. There will be more art, in aggregate, but what “greatness” there will be will tend to hide in art’s dilution and proliferation—its galloping invisibility. It will be with art as with everyday nature, which remained aesthetically unseen until bourgeois naturalists (still strong with us) took active interest in its disappearance. Unsupported and taken for granted, this subdetectable infra-art will tend towards harmonizing with nature and reducing our human footprint. It will not crop up, as it still does today, as a Banksy graffito, mosaics by Invader, or Vancouver’s horny Satan. It will no longer belong to the people in any meaningful way, just as nature will have ceased belonging to them as well.
§ De-Colonizing Art

A I did not know that the duty of art is to make the unexceptional feel special, to transform the ordinary into something noble, to raise it out of the vulgar muck into which it has sunk. Aren’t vulgarity etc. already potent enough?

B We’re too quick to be judgmental (notice how I didn’t say “to judge”). The average person has a right to greater self-esteem. To artists on high horses he will remain a drag. And he will find satisfaction seeing them thrown in the ditch.

The people obviously care about art if they want to be in and part of it. Don’t forget how much the history of painting owes to Dutch merchants. We’re quick with compassion for the struggle of the underserved masses. Is it right to turn our back on them, and call them undeserving of art?

A The people in the West are not what they used to be. They now themselves have artistic pretensions. They know best what art should be, they want to be its adjudicators.

The people used to have no interest in making art; the distinction of being a part of it, as model, object, or inspiration, was enough. Now they reckon that if it doesn’t reflect them, or is not made by them, it has no right to exist.

B So you would keep art from the child of Mexican immigrants who discovers creative self-expression and self-realization in describing the condition of his existence?

A No, I still have the old compassion in abundance: I want the disadvantaged to have the opportunity to discover and develop their talent, to see where it takes them. I just don’t think art should be the first stop for them. Was great art ever about self-expression and description? The self is far too overrated!
Those who throw themselves into art, they don’t worry me. They are serious. I encourage them. I don’t want real effort to go to waste. Only vanity should die on the vine. I object to the judge who on the one hand keeps them out, on the other embraces a select few of these castaways, eternally indebted to him, just for show, as proof of open-mindedness. I’m not sure those he embraces are always the best.

B There I agree. They are strategic choices.

A As “immigrants,” they have more respect for standards (I won’t say reverence — even I see this as too romantic, too dated), in much the same way that non-native speakers who want to assimilate are better than natives on grammar. If only they kept an ear to the ground . . .

My fear is that the average person will sooner drag art down with them to do their bidding than make an effort to be art-worthy. Like those who would rather pull the tree to the ground to reach the highest fruit than climb it or pick what is low-hanging, and end up breaking it in half. We might end up without art and with as much vulgarity as before: bruised fruit and barren tree. Art will not only become common, it will also be indistinguishable from the mundane everyday. Don’t forget that even if art in the age of Louis XIV reflected the life of the nobility, it was still only the life of the nobility. And the Romantics were not of the people they dilated on, had not themselves been dragged through the street and lived to tell about it. It is only recently, after decades of encouragement from and reshaping of mentalities among the learned, that the aesthetically semi- or uneducated are claiming the right to define art, to the applause of post-modern egalitarians who had insisted on not corrupting them with a canon. And all in the name of what?

B Of innovation, of thinking outside the box. Tradition is linear. Genius is non-linear. The weight of tradition had become too great; the new was stultified by it. Someone
had to sweep it aside, to clear the air. It’s still there if you want access to it. It’s just now much less overwhelming.

A This conceit of originality... [shaking head] We’re convinced we can do better, be more brilliant, than our predecessors, than our precursors—if we even allow them that honour anymore. And, truth be told, there is a lot that’s nasty in tradition... Not necessarily individually, but as a society, we think we have exponentially more-better to offer one another. We don’t want to owe the old anything, we self-made people. We want the future to owe us everything.

B You sound like a snob. Worse: a moralizing snob. My advice is that you keep these ideas under wraps—some cheese cloth—until the storm passes. Personally, I’m determined to ride it out. It’s too exciting.

A You’re getting to work, then?

B Now that everything is turned upside down, I can realistically hope that any rubbish I put out will be hailed somewhere as a treasure. Even the challenging stuff can be marketed as brain-training. A work without redeeming qualities is hard to find. It must really be outré to be widely disliked—and no dislike is universal. Ergo, there’s no such thing as overrated.

A If you say so.

B I will prove it!

    Happy are the days when art has never been easier... [winking and singing out of tune].

***