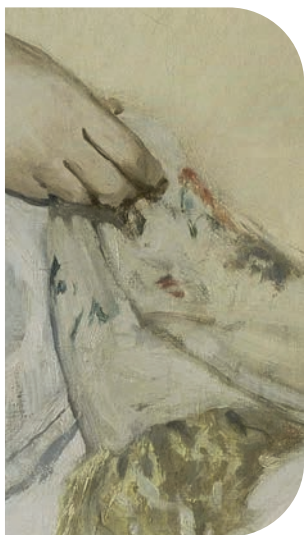


INTERPRETING ART

Sam Rose



Interpreting Art

SPOTLIGHTS

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Emily Baker, Alena Ledeneva, Timothy Mathews
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Introduction

The minds of the artists

Can we see into the minds of artists? Interpretations are often written as if the answer is a definite ‘yes’. This kind of mindreading goes back at least to the origins of modern art criticism in the early modern academies of art. It’s hardly surprising to find the vivid presentation of an artist’s thoughts in the inveterate storyteller Giorgio Vasari’s 1550 *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.¹ But it also came naturally to the artist-academics of the following centuries, reconstructing and debating parts of particular works of art that they assumed could be attributed to the actions of a fully conscious creator.² By the later 1700s art writers had started to adapt this feature to grander ends, using the language of conscious intent for abstract notions far beyond the artistic choices directly observed in artworks by the academicians. ‘The Greek artists were convinced that, as Thucydides says, greatness of mind is usually associated with a noble simplicity’, claimed a sentence added to the posthumous 1776 edition of J.J. Winckelmann’s *History of the Art of Antiquity* (*Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, see Fig. 1.1).³ In varying degrees of ambition, the claim to know what the artist really thought has become a familiar part of art history right through to the present day, even where we might least expect it. It’s a commonplace that artists are not in conscious control of meanings. Yet everywhere the language of the fully conscious artist creeps back in.

Perhaps talking of artists as if we’ve read their minds is just a case of people not meaning what they say, no more than an accidental writerly habit. It hasn’t seemed problematic, for example, for the same art historian who famously called for an ‘art history without names’ to analyse artworks



Fig. 1.1. J.J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, 2nd edition, Vienna, 1776.

by seeming to mindread in telling us what an individual artist like Raphael ‘saw’, ‘wanted’, ‘reserved his right to’, and ‘decided’.⁴ Likewise no one bats an eyelid now when an art historian cautions us that ‘among the many methods art historians have at their disposal, reading minds is not one of them’, but nonetheless through a close analysis of Jan van Huysum’s flower paintings does exactly that, telling us what the artist was ‘less interested in’ as opposed to ‘more’, and what ‘For van Huysum’ is just a ‘nice and playful detail’ as opposed to what ‘really matters’.⁵

But if apparent mindreading is just an accident of writerly habits, the true strangeness is seen nowhere better than when we argue over who has the right to say what a still-living artist has done. In 2018 an *Aperture* monograph on the artist-photographer Deana Lawson was published with a moving essay by Zadie Smith on Lawson’s vision of the subjects of the African diaspora in a ‘kingdom of restored glory’ (Fig. 1.2).⁶ These were celebratory artworks, Smith wrote, in which ‘[b]lack people are not conceived as victims, social problems, or exotics but, rather, as what Lawson calls “creative, godlike beings” who do not “know how miraculous we are”’. The same year Steven Nelson published a two-part article in which he included his own essay originally intended for the *Aperture* monograph.⁷ Nelson interpreted Lawson’s work as powerful less for direct affirmation than for its *critical* questioning of a medium so often bound up with the production of stereotypes and caricatures: showing ‘selves [that] are complex and complicated bodies that refuse boundaries that would restrict what is possible in the representation of black women’. In doing so he



Fig. 1.2. Alice Feaver, *Deana Lawson: An Aperture monograph*, 2021. Digital Painting. [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

contextualized her artwork, against the artist's wishes, in terms of her commissioned photojournalism as well as her fine art photography. Nelson's essay was rejected, and replaced with the one by Smith.

Nelson's response to the artist's apparent role in refusing publication of the essay reverberated with critics and historians: surely his task was to put forward 'a rigorous examination of the artist's work', rather than 'to regurgitate the artist and her editor's views'? Whatever the rights and wrongs of this position, one small but revealing detail went unrecognized in the controversy that ensued, no doubt because it's such a habitual part of writing on art that no one thought it significant.⁸ Namely, that Nelson's interpretation concluded by setting out its views – the particular understanding of the body that was central to it – *as the artist's own*. 'Lawson, like Adrian Piper, Lorna Simpson, Weems and others, understands the body not only as a site that insists on the construction of identity, but also as one where the artist can question the implication of black women in the long histories of representation that define a racialized present characterized by their demonization.' In this moment we see the interpreting writer speak over and to the artist about herself. With the article now a source of information for further interpreters to draw upon, even, the strange possibility arises that future histories will

be written in which *the critic's interpretation* offered by Nelson but denied by the artist, is nonetheless widely accepted as a true account of *the artist's own thought*.

This is a book about things people say about works of art. But it is unusual insofar as most scholarship of this kind tends to search for difference and division. Histories and analyses of art criticism and art history usually focus on particular individuals, periods and schools of thought, or connections to particular artistic movements, or particular 'theories' and 'methods', or the most exceptional of interpreters and novel possibilities for interpretation. As the examples I have briefly set out suggest, though, *there are features shared across a great deal of art interpretation, regardless of whether the author is a 'critic' or 'historian', regardless of artistic period discussed, regardless of the dates or location of the writer, and regardless of any self-proclaimed allegiance to a particular 'theory' or 'method'*. These are features that writers do not necessarily acknowledge in their own accounts of what they do, but are nonetheless present in the very way that interpretation is practiced and written down. The major premise of this book is that we might study and set out shared features and premises of interpretation of this kind. What if we attended to similarity as much as difference? What if we examined what interpreters of art actually *do* as much as what they claim that they are doing? Rather than insignificant details or accidents, such features may supply fascinating insights into the aims and underlying claims of interpretation, including how it is practised and how it achieves its effects.

Organization and use of this book

Most of this book is devoted to mapping out interpretation as it is often found in the Western tradition of art history, along the way drawing attention to a series of rhetorical and persuasive features and techniques that are involved. In doing so I attempt a clear and constructive analysis of art historical interpretation, accounting for the kinds of oddity seen in my opening examples even while accepting that some art writing remains unanalysable because it is grounded in 'light reverie, meandering, the gentle deliquescence of ideas, and the allure of half-conscious structures'.⁹

The book proceeds by setting out features of the way we tend to make sense of an art object. What are the assumptions, premises, and patterns that work to guide interpretation along the way? My account is intended to be relatively uncontroversial. I keep to clear cases and real-life examples taken from art and art history as much as possible. Theoretical

assumptions are necessary, of course, but in that regard I try to build a coherent analysis that follows widely agreed points in recent philosophies of art, art history, and history. One of the interesting things that emerges is that art history *could* be realist, just as other recent theoretical work has explored.¹⁰ Perhaps critics and historians really could show us the reality of artworks and their pasts, might ‘carve’ an artwork and its history ‘at its joints’, to adapt Plato’s famous formulation. And yet in showing how art history could be understood as realist, we will also see all the problems that ideal meets in practice. The importance of observing not just the ideal and the eccentric, but how things work in the process of everyday interpretation, is a key premise of this whole book. What are some of the features that we might need to examine more closely if we were to be confident that we really were recovering the past? And in what ways do we see how this is *not* exactly what happens in practice? In this sense the book is also about the expansion of interpretation as much as any sense of correctness: it shows how the norms of interpretation – and the kinds of practices that we usually carry out – *even when the account is aiming at accurate recovery of the past*, tend to expand the meaning of the artworks over time.

‘Interpretation’ will strike some as a strange choice as an overarching term for the many kinds of things people do with works of art. Susan Sontag famously attacked interpretation as a practice that replaced the sensuous immediacy of art with a kind of tamed and intellectualized textual translation.¹¹ Worries about the secondary nature of interpretation continue in similar form through to the present in the humanities. We should not ‘interpret’ in search of ‘meaning’, so the underlying argument goes, but instead prioritize a more direct engagement with artworks (an engagement put forward under slogans such as ‘description’, ‘understanding’, ‘presence’, ‘affect’, ‘form’, ‘the signifier’, and so forth). Useful as the time-honoured calls to attend more closely to works of art are, for a book of this kind I’ve found it more helpful not to prejudge the issue. Following the traditions of hermeneutics and pragmatism, I take inspiration from their insight that the standpoint or ‘horizon’ from which one interprets can play a role in determining even the most basic details of what we take things to be in the first place.¹² To talk of interpretation in the history of art can thus be to talk of the sense-making process from encountering an unfamiliar object through to the most abstract and elaborate forms of meaning-making. Interpretation is therefore not just the activity involved when we ask what an artwork ‘means’, but is present in everything from that highest-level activity down to the basic moment when we are faced with an unfamiliar object and try to ‘understand’ or

'describe' what is before us.¹³ This range of possible activities and levels of complexity has inspired the way the book was researched, which was to work upwards and outwards, mapping out a particular set of what might be called interpretative 'logics', 'features' or 'moves' as they proceed from the most basic sense-making to the highest-level attributions of extremely complex 'meaning'. This method is part of my claim for an analysis both sensitive to practice *and* clear and constructive. I follow through the various steps and premises with a range of actual examples of interpretation in practice, but in following things through step by step I build up an overall account that is far more than the sum of its parts. In other words, it is not just a set of case studies that each reveal the irreducibly unique nature of both art and analyses of it, or that reveal the entirely incommensurable natures of interpretations that appeal to different theories or methods or modes of narration.

Given this method and its limitations I also need to make two appeals to the reader here. First of all, this is only *one* way of analysing interpretation, not *the* logic of all interpretation in the whole history of art (let alone of art per se). But if the reader is charitable, they will see that what I cover does in fact apply to an extraordinary amount of art interpretation, not just that seen in the academic 'art history' of recent years from which (writing as an academic art historian) my examples tend to be drawn. It can likewise reveal various choices or crossroads where interpretative practice *could* be otherwise. All the same, there is much that is not covered here, and one merit of this is to make all the clearer what is involved in the legacies of the Western Enlightenment tradition that global and post-colonial histories are currently attempting to break away from. I would be very happy if laying this out inspires readers to pursue genuinely new practices that diverge from what is shown here, but I wager that much of what they instinctively think of as 'novel' or 'alternative' does not. Second, I ask that the reader respects the stress on interpretation in practice, and remains broad-minded in applying what they know. That 'theory' does not actually change practice in straightforwardly direct ways is a well-trodden theme, whether because theory is entirely inconsequential for practice, accidentally consequential, or simply deeply removed in ways that mean one does not neatly impact the other.¹⁴ Very often I'm sure the reader will find that a theory new or old they are aware of *suggests* that things would look very different from what is mapped out here. But again I wager that more often than not they will find that actual interpretations of art that in some way appeal to or claim to be driven by that theory really are not.

A final point about my own interest in all of this. It's a commonplace now that as much as we construct the objects we encounter, they also push back, surprise us, reveal their non-human otherness in the anarchic action that ensues. In art history the implications continue to be explored under banners such as presence, agency, temporality, ecology, mobility, and materiality. But lessons for the study of art writing can also be drawn from ways this thinking has fed into literary studies via what is sometimes called French pragmatic sociology.¹⁵ Artworks do not have to be revealed as the 'causes' (historical, social, political) that might stand behind them, so this goes, and those who use and enjoy those artworks do not have to be denounced as the fabricators and dupes that Pierre Bourdieu's early 'critical sociology' would have labelled them.¹⁶ 'How do we speak of the love of art, or of wine, or of any object or practice', asks Antoine Hennion,

without being satisfied by showing that it is really a matter of something else than what it thinks it is? No one reading Bourdieu's 1966 *The Love of Art* would have thought for a moment that the book would *actually* speak about the love of art: come on, you are not going to take the artwork 'itself' seriously, are you? That would mean falling back into aesthetics, or letting actors seduce you with their talk, getting sucked into belief rather than showing its mechanism. Well, as it happens, taking the love of art seriously is exactly what I'm working on.¹⁷

In literary studies the 'postcritical' is one term for the suggestion that we might work with texts in ways that value sympathetic description over suspicious denunciation.¹⁸ Though I prefer not to embrace the favoured postcritical word 'description' as a universal term for what art writers do, the key lesson remains that we can be analytic *and* sympathetic, can explain practices without undermining their value. I am interested in interpretation in art history in the most inclusive sense, not the narrow sense of interpretation 'as critique' as it is now commonly understood.¹⁹ I aim to use that same inclusivity to interpret the texts I discuss in this book. My own enjoyment of art and art history has been deepened immeasurably by my pleasure in reading art writing over the years. And in this book I want to take not just artworks but 'the love of art' – as it actually manifests itself – seriously, which is to say taking seriously the constructions discovered in art writing, and sometimes being open to 'letting actors seduce you with their talk'.

Notes

- 1 As brilliantly discussed in Barolsky, *Why Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari*; and Barolsky, *Giotto's Father and the Family of Vasari's Lives*.
- 2 That is to say, the artwork revealed an artist who was not only the active origin of its various pictorial features – 'Mr Poussin has clothed his figures...' – but also the maker of apparently conscious higher-level pictorial decisions: '...Mr Poussin, intending to shew how the Manna was sent to the Israelites, did not believe it would be sufficient to represent it fallen on the Ground...'. Félibien, *Seven Conferences Held in the King of France's Cabinet of Paintings*; Félibien, *Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, 97, 101–2.
- 3 Winckelmann and Lodge, *The History of Ancient Art*, 120–1. Lodge most likely drew on Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1, 325, with the sentence absent from the first edition, Vol. 1, 169.
- 4 Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An introduction to the Italian Renaissance*, 89–91. In his later reflections on the book in which he had made the claim, Wölfflin explicitly stated that the kind of 'vision' aimed at in his art history was after all 'the artist's way of seeing'. Wölfflin, 'Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Eine Revision', 215.
- 5 Grootenboer, 'Rembrandt'; Grootenboer, 'The Pensive Image', 29, 24.
- 6 All Smith quotations from Zadie Smith, 'Through the Portal'.
- 7 All Nelson quotations from Nelson, 'Issues of Intimacy, Distance, and Disavowal in Writing about Deana Lawson's Work'.
- 8 The controversy was explored in particular in the interview cluster Petrovich, 'Intimacy, Distance, and Disavowal in Art Publishing: Conversations with Dushko Petrovich'.
- 9 Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts*, xvii.
- 10 As explored for instance in Gilmore, *The Life of a Style*; Versteegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History*.
- 11 Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', 3–14; Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 111–12 (for critiques of Panofsky along these lines).
- 12 In addition to the works of Hans Georg Gadamer and Richard Rorty I have found particularly useful (though concluding not as I do that we should after all use 'understanding' for more immediate areas) Shusterman, 'Beneath Interpretation', as expanded in Shusterman, *Surface and Depth*. Over the last half century the analytic philosophy of art has worked through the actual functions and limits of the often-overstated claims about horizon, in writings ranging, for instance, from Walton's 'Categories of Art' to Lamarque's *Work and Object*. Also helpful in thinking about the functions and limits has been recent work in the philosophy and psychology of perception, in particular: Noë, *Action in Perception*; Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Experience*; and Nanay, *Between Perception and Action*. Equally helpful in thinking about the limits of interpretation have been two of the most influential scholarly critiques of interpretation's alleged dominance in the humanities, Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* and Felski's *The Limits of Critique*.
- 13 John Frow usefully speaks of (and models) such an 'inclusive sense of interpretation, extending it beyond exegesis to the complex of knowing, interpreting, judging, valuing, feeling, and consequentially acting which works as an inseparable whole in every act of making sense of things' (Frow, *On Interpretive Conflict*, 3).
- 14 Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 315–41; Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts*, 33–60, 112–45.
- 15 Carreira da Silva and Baert, *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, 42–3.
- 16 As in Hennion and Latour, 'Objet d'art, objet de science: Note sur les limites de l'anti-fétichisme'; Hennion, 'Those Things That Hold Us Together'; and Hennion, *The Passion for Music*.
- 17 Hennion, 'From ANT to Pragmatism', 299. I have discussed the relevant recovery of aesthetics and 'the aesthetic' in Rose, 'The Fear of Aesthetics in Art and Literary Theory'.
- 18 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Bruno Latour's early 2000s comments on 'reparative reading' and moving beyond 'critique' laid much of the ground, later developed into ideas that include 'surface reading' (Sharon Best and Stephen Marcus), the 'descriptive turn' (Heather Love), and most broadly the 'postcritical' (Rita Felski).
- 19 Frow, *On Interpretive Conflict*, 7–11.

2

Artists

Like all cultural objects, artworks are strange things. We treat artworks neither as purely imaginary entities that exist only in the mind, nor as purely physical objects that exist independently in the world.¹ For this reason it's hard to say much about an artwork before a maker enters the scene (Ed Clark's painting *Untitled*, 1957, serves as an example in [Fig. 2.1](#)). We can attempt to enumerate physical properties ('oil and acrylic...').² But as soon as we try to account for what an artwork represents or what it is like to experience, we quickly find ourselves describing how that artwork is *for someone*. ('Its true scale originates not in these measurements but in the felt immensity and vigor of the closed and crossed shapes they encompass.') And once we start to speculate about the traces of action that made the work look the way it does, we move to how the artwork was caused *by someone*. ('Although Clark has covered almost all the canvas with oil and acrylic to work up a picture, he also opens that picture out by varying the paint density from opaque to translucent and the paint surface from matte to glossy.') It is hardly surprising that in interpretation across the history of art the *someone* has tended to be the artist. The artist is the figure whose thought and action caused the work to look the way it does, who experienced the work as it was being created and in its finished state, and who was as well placed as anyone to consider and anticipate its use by others.

In the history of art the centrality of the artist was set from the start. It may only have been in the eighteenth century that the attempt to accurately label pictures in galleries with correct maker and date took hold, the nineteenth century when the norm of monographic life-and-works histories of single artists was established, and even then not until late nineteenth and early twentieth-century developments in professional art dealing, connoisseurship and curation that the labelling of works by definite artist or 'artistic personality' (or group thereof) was standardized.³



Fig. 2.1. Ed Clark, *Untitled*, 1957, Oil on canvas and paper, on wood, 116.84 × 139.7cm, The Art Institute of Chicago. © Estate of Ed Clark.

But in the foundational written models for modern art history – Pliny, then Vasari and writers in numerous early modern academies of art who followed his lead – artworks were firmly linked to their origins in the creative acts of artists and their relevant life, thoughts or career, while also discussing subsequent ‘uses’ of artworks largely through their reception and impact on other, later artists.

When grand contextualist art histories arose over the course of the nineteenth century, the artist was a handy figure through which the spirit of the times could act.

This citizenship, this love of enterprise, in small things as in great, in their own land as on the high seas, this painstaking as well as cleanly and neat well-being, this joy and exuberance in their own

sense that for all this they have their own activity to thank, all this is what constitutes the general content of their pictures.

So noted Hegel of Dutch art, before adding that it was ‘Fired by a sense of such vigorous nationality’ that ‘Rembrandt painted his famous Night Watch’, ‘Van Dyck so many of his portraits’, and ‘Wouwerman his cavalry scenes’.⁴ (Where it was inconvenient or unpractical to focus on individual artists, alternatively, collective *styles* were often called upon to do the work of generalizing about the intentions and actions of large groups of individuals: ‘classical’, ‘baroque’, ‘romantic’, and so on, calling to mind a group of characteristics that would apply to any one maker subsumed within.) When the needs of the art market and a professionalizing and newly empirical discipline demanded more rigorous classification as that century went on, the artist once again provided the basis: dealers, critics, connoisseurs, and scholars could now focus on the oeuvres of individual artists as a means of classifying, understanding, and interpreting previously disparate or mysterious works.⁵ Despite now-canonical pronouncements about the death of the author and injunctions against reading artists’ biographies directly into their works, not only do monographic exhibitions and books remain standard in the present day, but, as we will see, artists have maintained their authoritative place through the very way that artworks are talked about. Despite the bombastic rhetoric of some, that is, interpretation in the history of art has never found a way to circumvent the artist entirely.

Certain foundational writers in the academic discipline of art history as seemingly opposed as Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky have opted to openly acknowledge the indispensability of the artist in making sense of the work before us.⁶ Contemporary philosophy of art has its own terms for this, with Sherri Irvin and Amie Thomasson writing of the ‘artist’s sanction’ as determining ‘the ontological status of the work’: the artist’s actions and intentions ultimately fix the ‘boundaries’ and ‘features’ (not the full and final meaning) of otherwise deeply ambiguous works.⁷ Yet artists remain controversial figures on which to base art-historical interpretation. For every claim that they form the basis of what art historians do, there are counters that the idea of the artist is irredeemably problematic: that the very idea of the singular ‘artist’ is deeply misleading about the often multiple forms of authorship that artworks have, that artists are just one viewer of artworks among many, and no more interesting than others, even that the recovery of what the artist did in making the work is an impossible task we’d be best not to even try to pretend to carry out.

This chapter examines the appeal of the artist that remains in spite of all these problems: how it is that such a controversial figure can remain at the heart of what so many interpreters do. To this end I ask four key questions, the answers to which will show how the appeal to the artist manages to avoid so many of the accusations levelled against it. How can we be so interested in what the artist has done, and nonetheless refuse to take the artist at their word (an approach to which we might give the shorthand description ‘Cruel Intentions’)? If we can’t rely on the artist’s word, how might our own looking in the present be a better tool for reconstruction of the artwork as it was originally seen and used? (‘The Deliberate Artwork’.) What can we claim to have recovered of the artist, if the artwork is our primary source? (‘The Artwork’s Artist’.) And how, finally, does all of this get set down convincingly as written historical interpretation, avoiding dubious claims that we have read the minds of artists while still putting forward our interpretation as if it might have recovered the way that the artist themselves once engaged with the work? (‘Makerly Narration and Mindreading Narration’.)

Cruel intentions

‘I am always surprised at all the things people read into my photos, but it also amuse[s] me. That may be because I have nothing specific in mind when I’m working.’

Cindy Sherman

Could we just rely on the artist to tell us about their work? ‘He who dedicates himself to painting must start by cutting out his tongue’, Henri Matisse famously wrote in his artist-book *Jazz*.⁸ The artist has their own way of communicating what they have done – the works of art they produce. So, Matisse asked in the explanatory note, ‘Why do I need to employ a medium other than my own?’⁹ The words of an artist, writing about their own work, that disavow the words of artists writing on their own work, beautifully captures something of the subtle cruelty of the intentions of artists. Artworks are brought into being by their makers. And, as such, in searching for the ‘original context’ with which to make sense of the work, there is no more obvious basis than how the work was for that maker or group of makers. Discovery of the ‘artist’s artwork’, the true *intention* of the artist in creating their work, might thus seem to promise an end to interpretation, a final point at which the original artwork is fully and clearly revealed. In search of this possibility of

knowing the work as it originally was, artists are questioned and their words recorded and often reverently reproduced. Yet artworks are not entirely verbal things. Nor are they necessarily made in entirely conscious ways. Because of the nature of artworks and artistic creation there is, ultimately, no chance that the words of an artist could fully and finally capture how the work was for them. In other words intentions are a hope, even a promise, that can never quite be made good on.

The simultaneous desire for and distrust of the artist's words is a perennial feature of the history of art. The expectation that 'the artist speaks' has struck some as a twentieth-century phenomenon: the rise of the group manifesto explaining the basis of a new 'movement' in the early twentieth century, through the post-1960 moment when, rather than leaving it to the critics, artists increasingly attempted to intervene in and manage interpretation of their work, to the present situation today where the individual artist's statement has become a standard expectation in the presentation of work. But the practice of both hearing the artist's words and treating them with caution was standard already by the time of the early modern academies of art. There, though artists' views were widely distributed in the form of letters and treatises, even the words of the most revered of theorists, Nicolas Poussin, could not have the final say. In pictorial matters right down to somewhat arcane debates over subjects – in painting Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well should Poussin not have depicted all ten of the camels? – the evidence of the artworks themselves was set alongside recorded words to be debated again and again among academicians.¹⁰ It is the same basic stance that has continued right through to the 'crit' favoured in present-day academies, the central event in graduate art instruction in which staff and students gather to view, discuss, and generally make sense of a student-artist's recent work. Usually the student will talk briefly to introduce their work, though in some cases they are expected to offer full written statements and in others no more than a title. Even when faculty are asked for a 'cold read' – a response without any introduction to the work – the student will eventually be called upon to answer questions and elucidate, to 'own your position whatever it is'.¹¹ Nonetheless, students are aware that they are not expected to neatly sum up, let alone control, the meaning of their work, to give all the 'information' or overly 'clear references'. The artist's words are acknowledged, questioned, and *used critically* as just one part of an unfolding process during which nothing is more important than the experience of the actual work of art. 'I think of it as being in a dark room', notes one instructor of the process; 'After twenty minutes, you can see everything'.

Could there be a less cruel form of intention? What if the artist could conceptualize the work before or after creation, then say or write this down, leaving us with no harder a task than finding out what they stated about the work in question? Could we ever just ‘reprint their cognition’, as one art historian has put it?¹² Unfortunately this would require a model of the creative process that no working art historian seems to have ever actually believed. Either the artist would have to envision the work entirely in their mind before seamlessly transferring that vision into an identical artwork, or once complete the artist would look back on the work and again envision clearly and entirely the meaning in their mind. Artists would have to be able to *know and verbalize exactly what they are doing*: with no non-conscious and non-verbalized moments of training, habit, or background entering into their practice during creation.¹³ And artists would have to be able to *know and verbalize exactly what their work was going to do*: with no unexpected effects for present-day and future audiences beyond what they were able to definitely envision.

According to this mythic conception of meaning – sometimes variously and polemically implied to have been held by pre-modernist artists, by Benedetto Croce, and by unreflective art historian iconographers – the meaning of artworks could and maybe even should equate to definite things thought by the artist and their close associates.¹⁴ Meaning would in this case be *a consciously known and stateable intention*, as if a recoverable proposition stood ‘behind’ the work and could be revealed through ‘peeling back the literal surface’.¹⁵ In the terms of analytic philosophy this position is a ‘realist absolute intentionalism’ or ‘extreme actual intentionalism’, more elegantly described (and supported) by Arthur Danto as ‘surface interpretation’, wherein the meaning of the artwork is simply the artist’s own interpretation of that artwork.¹⁶ (It is also this conception that has been famously attacked in writings by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault on the ‘death of the author’ or overcoming of the ‘author function’.¹⁷) But whatever it is called, the position would leave the historian bound to repeat the words of the artists they study and unable to make claims that fall outside the artist’s stated aims. Imagine an art-history textbook or lecture series that consisted of nothing but artists’ statements, with all images, history, and analysis left aside. Despite the abstract theorizing of some, it is hard to conceive of, let alone actually find, anyone who writes about art this way.

The deliberate artwork

'I myself don't know exactly what I want from a picture, so it's hard to articulate that to somebody else – anybody else. When I'm doing it myself, I'm really [trying] to summon something I don't even know until I see it.'

Cindy Sherman

A writer, relaxing in the warmth of the day, lies down among sheep and listens to the conversation between a shepherd and peasant woman. The writer recounts a long dialogue with a girl who seems to cry over a dead bird but maybe is really in mourning for the loss of her virginity. The writer tells of a long dream in which a series of episodes lead up to the suicide of a priest. These are the kinds of passage found in the *Salons* of Diderot, who in texts produced from 1759 to 1781 (though only published years after his death) is often said to have elevated art criticism into the widely known and celebrated genre that it became over the next few hundred years.¹⁸ Yet these passages taken in isolation also fundamentally subvert a primary basis of the historical interpretation of art, including interpretation as practised in the *discipline* of art history over the same period. For in these passages Diderot treats the artwork as a mere found thing or natural object for the beholder to interact with as they please: occasions on which 'art and artist are forgotten' to the extent that the artwork is 'no longer a canvas, it is nature, it is a portion of the universe that one has before one'.¹⁹ The responses to the artworks here involve the forgetting that the artwork is a made thing, and instead the treatment of it as a real scene in which the viewer might imaginatively wander, or else as an occasion for creative fiction. In these moments – and it is important to note that in Diderot's writing these are *only moments* – we see what art writing looks like in which artworks are not made by particular people but are natural or accidental things. With the maker removed, criticism is set free, as writers as different as Oscar Wilde and Roland Barthes have noted. With no maker to fix meaning, the act of viewing becomes one of creating anew, making the viewer's own artwork out of what they encounter – a process that, in Wilde's words, 'is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself'.²⁰

Diderot also reminds us that historical interpretation of art depends on the opposite move: assuming that one is dealing with a 'deliberate artwork'. From Greek *ekphrasis* onwards, writers who evoke works of art in fiction and poetry have often abandoned the deliberate artwork entirely. But Diderot himself in the end always assumed deliberate artworks, a

point partly obscured by the sheer length of his often cut-down or extracted *Salons*. Diderot celebrated artworks that could so effectively make the viewer forget that they had been authored that they allowed a particularly all-encompassing form of engagement, but he was also deeply concerned with ‘the variety of brushes’, that is, individual artists and their characteristics.²¹ It was the artist who, with their immense skill and imagination, enabled the critic to interact with the painting as an immersive scene rather than a made object, and in this sense Diderot’s absorption was itself crafted by the artist. Diderot’s combination of intensely creative personal response *with* attention to what the artist has done has inspired much of the most creative (and outlandish) criticism of subsequent centuries, where the writer is able to rely on personal response and yet also anchor this in the artist themselves. We might term this the ‘implicitly deliberate’ artwork: allowing flights of fancy, but with these flights backed by the knowledge that they are after all guided by the authority of a maker who controls the work and its effects.

The stricter adherence to ‘explicitly’ deliberate artworks that became more common in the history of art can be seen in Goethe’s writing later that century on the Laocoön.²² In this mode the artwork is not only assumed to be a ‘network of artistic decisions’, as Neil Flax puts it, but the writer constantly reminds their readers that it is the traces of these decisions that they are looking at. In the Diderotian model the made-ness is largely implicit, present for example in titles or surrounding passages. In this second model the writing foregrounds the work as deliberate by tying visible features of the artwork back to the actions of the maker, with comments such as ‘the three figures are chosen extremely judiciously’, or ‘one loses oneself in astonishment at the wisdom of the artists’. Over subsequent centuries interpretation in the history of art has sometimes adhered to the Diderotian model of the implicitly deliberate, and sometimes the Goethian of the explicitly deliberate. But no art history has found a way to fully deny the deliberate artwork and embrace open fictionalizing while retaining the claim to, in some sense, be more than art criticism.

It was in large part the connoisseurs and art historical formalists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that formalized the deliberate artwork, both theorizing and more importantly practising modes of art historical interpretation that treated the artwork as the ultimate form of documentary evidence.²³ The deliberate artwork provided a solution, here, to the historical discipline’s twin problems that many artworks had little or no documentation associated with them, and that many were loosely or entirely misattributed. If the work was itself a

kind of primary or ‘internal’ evidence, then close inspection of artworks might be enough to date and attribute them, place them in historical sequence, and explain their most significant features. Whether in the hands of connoisseurs hoping to attribute artworks or formalists aiming to analyse the structures and effects of artworks and to place them in proper historical sequence, interpretation prioritized what the present-day interpreter most vividly saw, or experienced, in their direct encounter with the work. The evidence of this encounter was historically valid because it closed in on the artwork as it had originally been. (Not the artwork ‘in itself’, but the artwork ‘as originally created’.) The premise and its practice were distilled into a single text as succinctly as anywhere by Sigmund Freud, who in writing on Michelangelo’s *Moses* pointed – in contrast to the vast array of commentaries he first noted – to the strange position of the stone tablets clutched in the crook of one arm, and suggested that Moses was shown in the act of recovering and controlling himself, having a moment earlier almost dropped the tablets in anger after witnessing his people worshipping the golden calf (Figs. 2.2–2.3).²⁴



Fig. 2.2. Michelangelo Buonarotti, *Moses*, marble, 235 × 210 cm, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome. Photograph: Jörg Bittner Unna. [CC BY 3.0](#).



Fig. 2.3. Illustrations to Sigmund Freud, 'Der Moses Des Michelangelo', *Imago* 3 (1914).

A careful reader of Morelli, Freud as so many of the connoisseurs started with the 'powerful effect on me of the work', assuming that one could reason from 'effect on me' to effect on the artist to what the artist had thought and done in making the work 'in so far as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work and in getting us to understand it'. Freud's interpretation thus recovered 'the artist's *intention*', his ultimate goal, even though as far as the artist was concerned that intention could never be 'communicated and comprehended in words'.

Drawing on all of these figures along with later ones who helped spell things out, it is possible to extract three underlying principles that tend to operate whenever interpretation proceeds on the basis of assuming a deliberate artwork. First: *The artist relinquishes their work.*²⁵ The creation of artworks involves often-lengthy forms of serial action, as they are conceptualized, modelled, reworked, and so on repeatedly over time. But there is also a point when the artist stops, deciding that their work is finished enough to go out into the world, or else they are simply unable to continue work. We are left with a concrete thing that is at once the end point of purposeful action, and a survival of that end point from past into the present. Second: *Though artworks may not be the product of consciously known action, they are at least the product of deliberate*

action.²⁶ The artwork that the viewer sees is a record of the artist's deliberate action, so that features of the artwork noticed by the viewer can be assumed to be ones that the maker deliberately caused to be that way. Even when 'chance operations' are employed, they are either done so knowingly or at least accepted by the artist as forming part of the work. Third: *The artist works not just with the eyes, but for the eyes.*²⁷ Artworks are not only products of deliberate action, experienced by artists as they are made, but are perhaps also made by artists to be experienced in particular ways. Artists, that is, may act as spectators of their own work while imaginatively playing the role of future viewers.

The artwork's artist

'...Or I'm just very, very smart.'

Cindy Sherman

The deliberate artwork has allowed interpreters in the history of art to skirt arguments about intention, almost universally attempting reasoned historical reconstructions of how original artists and viewers engaged with artworks – without ever, that is, being constrained by the narrow model of 'intentions' dismantled by critiques of the author. (As I've pointed out elsewhere, even where rival factions argue over high-level theoretical and methodological differences, they end up working in much the same way.²⁸) This laissez-faire approach has strange implications of its own, however: troubling for much literary history's claims to be actual 'history', and potentially just as worrying for art-historical interpretation if practised without care.

When writers assume a deliberate artwork, their account of the work reveals what the artist has done in creating that work. In turn this account can subtly shade into describing the artist as revealed by the work: the kind of person who acted in creating this particular work. 'I don't analyze what I'm doing', states Cindy Sherman, 'I've read convincing interpretations of my work, and sometimes I've noticed something that I wasn't aware of, but I think, at this point, people read into my work out of habit. Or I'm just very, very smart.'²⁹ In this joke Sherman wonderfully indicates how even the most complex forms of interpretation can, strangely, come to seem like they were, after all, thoughts and aims that the artist themselves had in making the work – a process whereby the cleverness of interpreters elevates the artists to a similar level of cleverness.³⁰

The connoisseurs and art historical formalists were well aware that in revealing the artwork as originally created, their interpretations couldn't help but reveal that original creator, often in ways that seemed to go beyond or even contradict documentary evidence about any real-life person who had made the work. In a neat loop, close attention to the artwork revealed how its maker had made it to be, and how the artwork's maker had made it to be revealed the personality of that maker. But because of this loop, these writers did not take close engagement with an artwork to discover the maker as 'person', precisely, but instead the 'artistic personality' (Berenson and Fry), or the 'aesthetic personality' (Croce), or 'creative personalities' (Julius von Schlosser). The 'determination of purely artistic personalities' through the experience of the work came first, Berenson wrote, 'and only then, and chiefly for mere convenience of naming, might one turn to documents ... and attempt to connect with this abstract some actual personality in the past'.³¹ So is the artistic personality thought to be real, or is it just a creative fiction of the interpreter's own?

A long convention in criticism has stressed the latter answer. According to this convention critics engage in a kind of fictionalizing talk when they speak of the artwork in relation to its maker.³² The name of the artist invokes no more than an imaginary character consistent with a set of public productions and statements, a useful way to talk about what was realized in the artwork but which makes no claim about real-life persons and goings-on. So it is fine to confidently say things like 'Cindy Sherman sees the world as ...', going far beyond or directly contradicting Sherman's own words, because one is talking not of a real person but just a character consistent primarily with a set of artworks. Griselda Pollock has put the point especially clearly: 'The usual formulation is this: Edouard Manet is the historical person, but "Manet" is the author whose artistic identity is derived from a study of the texts and practices which constitute an artistic project.'³³ But Pollock's essay and work more broadly are constant reminders that art historians should not allow what Pollock calls 'painted fictions' to occlude actual 'historical persons'.

Whereas criticism may assume a deliberate artwork but just reveal an imaginary character as the source of the work, historical interpretation necessarily makes a real-life claim about *an actual person or people*, a hypothesis about lives and events that has consequences and implications beyond what imaginative whimsy might. The critic and the historian may be working in exactly the same way: gathering all available evidence then engaging with the work as closely as possible and testing how it seems to be. The critic may instead, however, push to maximize the interest or

value of artwork for them and their moment over the reconstruction of how things were. The critic may even – in a move favoured in much ‘depth interpretation’ in art and literary history – maximize value for the present, then ‘resurface’ and claim that they were speaking not of an imaginary character but the real-life maker all along. With art interpretation’s tendency to look from our own perspective and end up speaking for others, these are possibilities that any form of interpretation that wants to claim historical and ethical responsibility for itself needs to bear carefully in mind. The issue is all the more forceful, as we see next, when the very mode of writing seems to speak not just for, but even having briefly become, those others.

Makerly narration and mindreading narration

‘I don’t think I can see the world through other people’s eyes, but I can capture an attitude or a look that makes others think I can. I have an appreciation for why people choose to look the way they do. But I can’t know what they experience.’

Cindy Sherman

We have seen that once an interpreter goes looking for the artist’s artwork by assuming a ‘deliberate’ artwork, they often find the artwork’s artist: the work revealed is taken to be that of the ‘artistic personality’ involved in the work’s creation. What we see now is how the powers and possibilities of the work come to be attributed to, *because they are narrated as*, the actions and thoughts of the artist.

To make sense of *mindreading narration* it’s helpful to first note its forerunner, *makerly narration*. Makerly narration is a practical and perhaps unavoidable corollary to the assumption that artworks are deliberate. Because artworks are products of deliberate action, ‘networks of artistic choices’, the form of the finished work seems to reveal something of the actions that went into its creation. In describing the finished work, then, it is natural to talk of the artist’s action such as it is revealed in that finished work. Even more than this, descriptions of artworks may in part take the form of *the imagined story of their making*. We have seen this already in the opening example of this chapter, where Darby English describes Ed Clark’s painting by listing not only the facts of the physical object, and how the work affects a particular viewer, but the actions of the artist that caused the work to look the way it does. The feature can be found in some of the earliest writings on art in the Western tradition

– Pliny, Homer, and so forth – where what sometimes appear to be makerless descriptions of the scenes that artworks present, on closer inspection turn out to be stories about the artist making the work. Classical *ekphrases* are often said to deny the made-ness of works altogether, but look closer, and in many we see instead that writers in fact narrate the series of events and actions involved in the work coming to assume its finished form.

In perhaps the single most famous example of early *ekphrasis*, Homer's passages on the shield of Achilles in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*, scene after scene on the shield is recounted as if the very thing stood before the narrator's eyes. Nonetheless, the careful charting of the scenes on the shield is preceded by an account of its maker Hephaestus readying self and tools, then language that reminds us that the shield's features are specifically made by him. First Hephaestus retires to the forge, sets bellows and furnace in action, adds silver, brass, tin and gold, and takes up hammer and tongs. The opening description of the shield is then punctuated by phrases that remind us the scene is unfolding before our eyes because we are hearing it described in the act of making: the shield is first 'formed', then features one after another 'wrought' or 'designed'. Soon this sense of the makerliness of the narration is so natural that the description slips largely into pure enumeration of the scenes, only occasionally punctuated by reminders of the makerly narration unfolding such as 'A field deep furrow'd next the god design'd', or (in Alexander Pope's free translation) 'Next this, the eye the art of Vulcan leads'.³⁴ The technique is so powerful because of the subtlety with which the maker's presence is felt, perfectly intertwined as it is with seemingly neutral description. We feel when the scenes are described that they could be no other way, but we are also left in no doubt that this is also how the maker and his first audience would have seen the work. The conceit is brilliantly exploited in W. H. Auden's reworking in which, highlighting how different things might be from Homer's makerly narration that collapses making and viewing, a viewer looks upon the shield unfolding and sees something entirely different and unexpected, their horror at the scenes of war and suffering all the more powerful because they are mere spectator to that which the silent artist unfolds before them:³⁵

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead

An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

The narration involved in the *Iliad*'s passages on the shield of Achilles, like the narration involved in the majority of early modern writing around the academies from Vasari through to Georges Guillet de Saint-Georges, concerns itself with what are very obviously *actions and choices about the making* of the work – that is, choices that concern what is most obviously and straightforwardly an artistic matter. Remarks about thoughts and character are often made, but only of the kind that have or could have been observed by others.³⁶ Almost always we are firmly in the realm of what the artist *did* rather than what they *thought*. These writings, as such, are for the most part very coy about the artist's subjectivity.

It was not until the nineteenth century that art writing habitually attributed grand forms of thought to artists that strayed well beyond the bounds of makerly narration. John Ruskin's disdain for later-fifteenth-century Venice had already given him the basic context of decadence and decline, but climbing the ladder to confirm that the sculptor of the tomb effigy of Andrea Vendramin (Fig. 2.4) really had only bothered to carve the half of the head visible from the ground, Ruskin placed all of this back into the agency and psychology of the artist themselves (Fig. 2.5). Where we might expect to read of disdain for the artist's times and working conditions, instead we are told of that 'utter coldness of feeling, as could only consist with an extreme of intellectual and moral degradation: Who, with a heart in his breast, could have stayed his hand as he drew the dim lines of the old man's countenance – unmajestic once, indeed, but at least sanctified by the solemnities of death – could have stayed his hand, as he reached the bend of the grey forehead and measured out the last veins of it at so much the zecchin?'³⁷ The attribution of grand forms of thought to artists was found in more strictly academic writers just as much as those renowned for poetic licence. In a particularly astonishing passage in which the slippage from patron and wider context back to artist is laid bare, Jacob Burckhardt wrote of Brunelleschi (as the architect of the Palazzo Pitti façade) that 'one wonders who was this man of power who scorned the world and who, thanks to the means at his disposal, tried to keep himself distant from anything pleasing or delicate'.³⁸ 'It was in the works of Florentine artists', Francis Haskell comments, that Burckhardt 'discovered many of the attributes that he would later describe as characteristic of the Renaissance despot'.³⁹ Attentive as he was to the works of the artists, it should also be said, Burckhardt seemed to discover these attributes in the artists' very minds.

Mindreading artists alone is hardly likely to convince. But nineteenth-century art writing, as the passage from Ruskin suggests, also combined such mindreading with makerly narration, leading to a new form of 'mindreading narration'. Makerly narration, to repeat, was already extraordinarily powerful because the sense that the account is backed by the maker allows all other elements around it to appear to have the same authority. Words and phrases directly linked to traces of the action of the maker are used as reminders that makerly narration is unfolding.⁴⁰ ('Formed', 'wrought', 'designed', 'the art of Vulcan leads'.) But art writing tends to trade largely in description of the features, likenesses, and effects of the artwork that are either attributed to the artwork itself or phrased in the passive voice. ('Here sacred pomp and genial feast delight'.) Taken out of context, these artwork-centred and passive-voice descriptions are entirely ambiguous about who perceives the likeness or is being affected. So without having to *state* that these things are this way *for the artist*, the reminders of the artist's action give the impression that we are reading of the artist's own sense of their work.



Fig. 2.4. Tomb of Andrea Vendramin, c. 1480–95, marble, Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Venice. Photograph: Didier Descouens. [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).



Fig. 2.5. Tullio Lombardo, effigy of Andrea Vendramin. Photograph courtesy of Mauro Magliani/Artchive.

Mindreading narration takes things a step further. In makerly narration it is never certain that the vision or thought are that of the artist except in relation to the observable actions of the artist. Mindreading narration adds accounts of seeing and thinking that go far beyond the observable, effectively telling us about the minds of artists while seeming to be justified in doing so because the interpreter anchors their speculations in an apparently objective story of the work's making. It is most obvious when explicit, something that is familiar and often remarked upon in the older forms of art criticism and history that revelled in (and were sharply criticized for) their heavy psychologizing (Fig. 2.6). 'Vermeer seems almost not to care, or not even to know, what it is that he is painting. What do men call this wedge of light? A nose? A finger? What do we know of its shape? To Vermeer none of this matters, the conceptual world of names and knowledge is forgotten, nothing concerns him but what is visible, the tone, the wedge of light.'⁴¹ But explicit mindreading narration can also be found in 'new' art history of the later twentieth century through to the present, as in moments when a hard-earned reading is affirmed or secured with a rhetorical flourish; 'Vermeer recognizes the world present in these women as something other than himself and with a kind of passionate detachment he lets it, through them, be.'⁴²

Crucially though, instead of grand and entirely open feats of mindreading of these kinds, the writer can use the mode with incredible subtlety. In this case they almost entirely use makerly narration to describe the work through constant reference to the artist's action as visible in features of the artwork. In addition however, and sometimes even just once or twice in the narrative, the writer will subtly switch to a deeper register and tell us something more, securing their account as 'of' the artist in a deep sense while avoiding the feeling that they are involved in unwarranted psychologizing. Thus Norman Bryson writes of Caravaggio's 'aggrandising' approach to still life (Fig. 2.7), a project of using the insignificant to demonstrate the power of art by showing its ability to turn even the ordinary from 'dross' to 'gold', in pages *almost entirely* precise in containing only makerly narration and powers attributed to the work rather than the artist.⁴³ Phrasing that tells us of the artist's agency is given only for what we can observe in the work: 'Caravaggio chooses fruits with complex markings on their skin'; 'Caravaggio deliberately abstracts his still life from any mundane location we can recognise'. More abstract thoughts are phrased actively as belonging to artworks or passively as judgements about artworks: 'the Caravaggio deliberately cuts still life's ties to the earth'; 'in the Caravaggio



Fig. 2.6. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, c. 1663–4. Oil on canvas, 49.6 × 40.3 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 2.7. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*. Oil on canvas, 46 × 64.5 cm, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

still life the interest lies exactly in the power of art – and of this artist – to raise an intrinsically humble branch of painting to the level of the heroic'. Even at one point speaking of the actual aims of Caravaggio's art, Bryson avoids a definite appeal to the artist by subtly asking what 'is the aim of *his painting*?' Then, finally, Bryson offers us just one line that reminds us that what the interpretation has told us is *Caravaggio's* perspective for sure: 'Caravaggio wants hyperbole, not bathos'. It is in exactly this way, to return to this book's opening example, that Steven Nelson can write persuasively and poignantly of Deana Lawson's work in a way that does not precisely conform with her own view, rigorous throughout in attributing agency to the work and himself, before finally suggesting that 'Lawson ... understands the body' a particular way.⁴⁴

It is ironic, in retrospect, that the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were the period of great scholarly enterprises of sorting out the reality of various documentary texts on artists and their lives, yet in the hands of the connoisseurs and formalists it was also the period when academic art history fully embraced this form of writing, which lent a powerful literariness and fiction-like quality to the accounts of artists being produced.⁴⁵ It has remained a standard mode in art history ever since, though with the mode, let alone its strange consequences, rarely brought into the open. One of these strange consequences, for

instance, is the historian's ability to speak for and as the artist, while denying that they have any interest in what the artist themselves actually claims about their work.⁴⁶ Whatever the rhetoric of interpreters, however, mindreading narration *does* make claims about the people whose stories it tells, and in this sense has an equally strange consequence for the way that art history seems to straddle the borderlines between fact and fiction, truthful recounting and fanciful storytelling. According to a broad consensus in narratological theory of the last half century, non-fiction writing demands a knowing narrator, able to coolly survey histories that stretch across times, places, and characters.⁴⁷ The non-fiction narrator is in this sense very nearly the 'omniscient narrator' of the realist novel, the God-like figure who can move not only across time and space but *inside* minds to communicate the thoughts and feelings of characters.⁴⁸ In non-fiction writing, however, because the narrator is the real-life author and knows only what that author knows, the ability to look inside a character's head is characteristically *earned*, always suitably qualified in the text with footnotes and a cautious 'perhaps', or 'maybe', or 'he/she/they must have thought'.⁴⁹ Art historians, as narrators, love to dispense with the telling warning tags. Unqualified as they are, statements like 'To Vermeer none of this matters ...' or 'Lawson ... understands the body ... as' present themselves as definite reports of an artist's thought. With makerly narration the interpreter seems to have travelled back in time to have watched the artist making the work, and then reports this back to the reader. With mindreading narration it is as if artworks allow interpreters to be something more than day-to-day critics and historians. It is as if they travel back in time to briefly become the artist themselves, seeing and experiencing the work and world as the artist did, before resuming their own perspective and telling others what they have learned.

Notes

- 1 Lamarque, *Work and Object*, 56–77, 143–86; Thomasson, 'Ingarden and the Ontology of Cultural Objects', 115–36; Thomasson, 'The Ontology of Art', 78–92.
- 2 Quotations in this paragraph from the extraordinarily careful and thorough description of Clark's untitled work in English, 1971, Chap. 1.
- 3 Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, 19–77; Pullens, 'The Individual's Triumph', 1–26; Guericio, *Art as Existence*, 34–224.
- 4 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 169 (Vol. 1).
- 5 White, *Canvases and Careers*, 76–110; Green, 'Dealing in Temperaments', 57–76; Green, 'Stories of Self-Expression', 527–32; Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 79–93; Rose, *Art and Form*, 18–70. Though focused on Van Gogh, Nathalie Heinich has given a particularly revealing analysis of the general interpretative procedures that could follow, in Heinich, *The Glory of Van Gogh*, 3–34.
- 6 Wölfflin, 'Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Eine Revision', 210–18; Panofsky, 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', in Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 35–8, 43–5.

- 7 Irvin, 'The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art', 320, as discussed in Thomasson, 'Ontological Innovation in Art'.
- 8 The phrase, as Jack Flam notes, was one Matisse used a number of times; Matisse, *Matisse on Art*, 2.
- 9 Matisse, *Jazz*, 34.
- 10 Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions*, 16.
- 11 The account and quotations are drawn from Fine, *Talking Art*, xiii, 58, 73, 110–13.
- 12 Whitney Davis, *The Canonical Tradition in Ancient Egyptian Art*, xvii.
- 13 The practical impossibility of this ideal is nicely brought out in Herbert, *Brushstroke and Emergence*.
- 14 Respectively Nochlin, 'Seurat's Grande Jatte', 134; Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects: An introduction to aesthetics*, 68, 99–100; Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 111–12.
- 15 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 293.
- 16 Livingston, *Art and Intention*, 139–40; Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', 75–6; Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Chapters 2 and 3. Danto's 'surface interpretation' was refined to a more 'modest' intentionalism in response to the elaboration by Peg Brand and Myles Brand, 'Surface and Deep Interpretation' (with response by Danto) in Rollins (ed.), *Danto and His Critics*, 69–83.
- 17 Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 142–8; Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 205–22.
- 18 I have taken these examples from the *Salons* of, respectively 1765, 1763, and 1765. Théophile Gautier and Lawrence Alloway are among the prominent writers who have made the claim that Diderot was responsible for establishing the genre of art criticism in its modern form, as mentioned in Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism: Histories, strategies, voices*.
- 19 Diderot, *Œuvres esthétiques*, 686–7.
- 20 Wilde, *Oscar Wilde: The major works*, 261.
- 21 Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture*, 181.
- 22 Goethe, 'Über Laokoon', in Goethe, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, 165 (Vol. 13), as discussed in Flax, 'Fiction Wars of Art', 7–10.
- 23 Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, 45–119; Rose, *Art and Form*, 1–70.
- 24 'The Moses of Michelangelo', in Freud, *Collected Papers*, 257–87 (Vol. 4). First published as Freud, 'Der Moses Des Michelangelo'.
- 25 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 13–15; Lamarque, *Work and Object*, 33–41.
- 26 Lamarque, *Work and Object*, 41, 66–8, 154–60.
- 27 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, Chap. 1; Whitney Davis, *Masking the Blow*, 30–3.
- 28 Rose, 'Close Looking and Conviction'.
- 29 *Interview Magazine*, 'Cindy Sherman'.
- 30 Alexander Nemerov has drawn attention to this in recent art-historical writing, in Nemerov, 'Paper Stars'.
- 31 Berenson, *The Study and Criticism of Italian Art*, vii–viii (Vol. 1).
- 32 Especially clear articulations are given in Nehamas, 'The Postulated Author' and Levinson, 'Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism'. The fuller range of possibilities for this position are usefully spelled out in Livingston, *Art and Intention*, Chapter 6.
- 33 Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 255. The point is explored in detail in Orton and Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, 315–42.
- 34 I have used the particularly well-known Pope translation (Homer, 1761), which somewhat dramatizes the effect, though the basic point I make here is a widely accepted one going back at least to Lessing's observation that 'Homer does not paint the shield as finished and complete, but as a shield that is being made'. This sense of the shield in the process of being made is explored in particular detail by James A. W. Heffernan, who points among other things to the narrative force provided by the heavy use of past tense action verbs; Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 10–22.
- 35 Auden, *The Shield of Achilles*.
- 36 A key exception are certain epigrams, in which fictionalizing or poetic licence allowed the writer to inhabit the imagined maker's person quite fully. Thanks to Elizabeth Mitchell for discussions on this point.
- 37 Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 49–52 (Vol. 11). I owe this point to Haskell, *History and Its Images*, 323.
- 38 Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone*, 177.

- 39 Haskell, *History and Its Images*, 341, 343.
- 40 This analysis draws on Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History' and Rose, 'The Significance of Form'.
- 41 Gowing, *Vermeer*, 19.
- 42 Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 223.
- 43 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 77–81 (my italics for the quotation about 'his painting').
- 44 Nelson, 'Issues of Intimacy, Distance, and Disavowal in Writing about Deana Lawson's Work'.
- 45 Enterprises that have been brilliantly discussed in Platt, 'The Artist as Anecdote'.
- 46 Rose, 'Close Looking and Conviction', 161–2, 166–7.
- 47 Pihlainen, 'The Moral of the Historical Story'; Genette, 'Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative'; Cohn, 'Signposts of Fictionality'.
- 48 Though still in quite specific ways and to complex ends, as in Warhol, 'A Feminist Approach to Narrative', 96.
- 49 Löschnigg, 'Narratological Categories and the (Non)-Distinction between Factual and Fictional Narratives'.

3

Contexts

It's rarely mentioned how much time is spent *not* discussing artworks in the founding work of modern art criticism – a pamphlet review of the 1746 Salon of the Académie Royale by the French courtier La Font de Saint-Yenne. The pamphlet began with a lengthy discussion of the glories of history painting and its decline in contemporary France, including such choice elements as a digression on the deleterious effects of mirrors in interior decoration. In doing so the pamphlet set up a *context* for the art about to be discussed, a frame according to which sense could be made that highlighted the perspective from which the critic was (and by extension their audience should be) looking. Turning finally to the works of art on display, the analysis of detail, which also involved the unprecedented inclusion of harsh comments about the paintings that outraged the academicians, has a kind of naturalness or felt inevitability due to this advance contextualization.

So why devote three pages to mirrors and a total of thirteen to general matters (in the modern French edition) before the mention of any actual works of art on display in the exhibition?¹ In a general sense, the preamble is a reminder of something already indicated in the previous chapter: we rely on information outside the artwork itself to help establish what it is that we are actually encountering. Many others around La Font's time had noticed how radically words connected with an artwork might affect the way it was understood. Art-writer-theorists like the Abbé du Bos and Jonathan Richardson warned artists that the depiction of unfamiliar stories would lead to unintelligibility, while artists from Gerard de Lairese to William Hogarth experimented with textual additions in order to avoid the ambiguities that resulted from contextless depictions of bodily actions, facial expressions, and events.² La Font's great achievement was to demonstrate that for an extended piece of *art writing* to say more than just the obvious, it too should use words to set up a context or

contexts through which to shape the artworks discussed. La Font himself soon showed how broad the possibilities were in writing arguably his greatest piece of art criticism, just a few years later, as a dialogue between the Louvre, the city of Paris, and the ghost of the seventeenth-century minister and architect of the Académie Royale, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (Fig. 3.1). The device was later turned back on the critic by the defender of the academy Charles-Nicolas Cochin, who in *Les Misotechnites aux Enfers* showed La Font cast into the River Styx for his art-critical sins (and forced to read the art criticism his example had encouraged), in dialogue with another critic just arrived in the underworld (Fig. 3.2).³ Though many followed La Font in contextualizing with their own analysis of the state of contemporary art, devices for the construction of a context soon ranged all the way to satirical pamphlets that narrated an imagined encounter with the exhibition in a deliberately comic or bizarre situation: ‘Merlin at the Salon’ (1787), ‘Judgement of a Fourteen Year Old Girl’ (1777), ‘The Living Dead at the Salon’ (1779), ‘A Glimpse of the Salon by a Blind Man’ (1775), and even ‘Ah! Ah! Or Veritable, Interesting, Curious,



D. L. F. inven. E. Ben. del. et sculp. Le Bas sculp. color.

L'OMBRE DU GRAND COLBERT.

Fig. 3.1. Frontispiece to La Font de Saint-Yenne, *L'Ombre du Grande Colbert*, 1752.

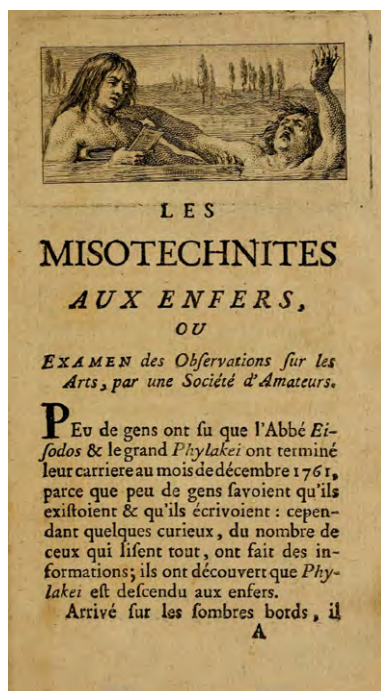


Fig. 3.2. Charles-Nicolas Cochin, *Les Misotechnites aux Enfers*, 1763.

And Remarkable Account of the Conversation between Marie Jeanne the Flowergirl and Jérôme the Ferryman at the Louvre Salon, While Examining the Pictures There on Display, Gathered and Presented by Mr. A.B.C.D.E.F.G.H.I.J.K.L.M.N.O.P.Q.R.S.T.U.V.W.X.Y.Z. etc., Optician to the Quinze-Vingts, Nowhere and Everywhere' (1787).⁴ Though not always obvious, and certainly not as flamboyant as in these cases, it is hard to imagine interesting art writing without interesting contextualization of some such kind.

For such a widely used term, 'context' is surprisingly resistant to being defined or employed with any kind of precision. Contexts in the broadest sense might simply be a concrete situation in which people have certain beliefs, interests, and purposes, according to the philosopher Robert Stalnaker's characterization of the standard 'informal' and 'intuitive' use of the term.⁵ In related artistic terms a context may simply be a 'reception situation' with its own 'prearranged interpretative spheres' for artwork and beholder, as the art historian Wolfgang Kemp puts it.⁶ In various academic disciplines that interpret cultural objects, however, 'context' has come to be more narrowly associated with *original historical context*, that is, with placing things back into the time and place in which they were created and first used. This historicist use of context developed from an earlier linguistic one also common in art writing, in which a word or passage is said to be made sense of through the 'context' of those around it. By the 1930s, art writers regularly referred to 'context' in terms of the original historical setting of artworks to be 'restored' by the art historian, the work of art itself now 'a fragment torn from the context of time'.⁷ Nonetheless, it was not until 1970s polemics around a new social history of art that the demand to place art 'in context' became a 'catchphrase' or basis of a 'new orthodoxy in the discipline'.⁸ By the early 1980s figures as different as the art historian Werner Hoffman, the historian of West Africa Marion Johnson, and the artist Rita Donagh could write of putting anything from one artist to an entire continent's art 'in context', safely assuming their readers would both know and accept the premise without question.⁹ According to the historicist-contextualist sense at work in all of these writings, contexts can be used to solve problems of ambiguity and intelligibility: in a minimal sense to delimit some parameters to the ways within which artworks can plausibly be said to have functioned when they were first made, and more ambitiously to ensure that our present-day encounters with those works can be accurately brought into line with the way they originally functioned.

That, at least, is the dream of historical context. Just as often, though, it has been attacked. One prominent instance in art history came

from the poststructuralists of the 1980s and '90s, who pointed out that supposedly safe and stable 'historical contexts' were as much a product of interpretation as that which they were supposed to anchor. '[I]t cannot be taken for granted', Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson caution, 'that the evidence that makes up "context" is going to be any simpler or more legible than the visual text upon which such evidence is to operate.'¹⁰ The elements that make up an 'original context' are open to interpretation, as are their connections to features of works of art. And even having decided on a secure context, we inevitably also 'retrofit', to borrow a term from Bruno Latour.¹¹ Our best present-day accounts of the phenomena that make up a particular context (from the materiality of paint through to dynamics of economic structures and personal identities) will be used to make sense of it, leading to an account of an 'original context' updated with terms and concepts that would not have been explicitly recognized or used during the historical moment to which they refer. The most basic art-historical example of this is the retrospective use of stylistic labels – literati, baroque, minimalist – that claim to label something real even though not described as such by actual artists of the time. But the process really pervades even the most historicist forms of contextualization, for we can never fully dispense with present-day accounts of phenomena when trying to make sense of the historical past.

Controversies around context should not make us abandon the term, let alone (as some have concluded) abandon all hope of historical understanding, but instead to be well aware of how contexts cut both ways.¹² For the historicist-contextualist, contexts can be used to disambiguate, to make sure that artworks are not limitless and unruly, to make sure that we are not seeing in an entirely presentist way. But because contexts are used to make sense of works, it is equally true that their use requires creativity and is productive of new ways of seeing. In practice art writers of all stripes (however avowedly 'contextualist' or 'noncontextualist', 'historicist' or 'presentist') *use* contexts to say things about works of art.

Contextualization from pre-set to saw-toothed

It is a truism that the translation of visual artwork into words is a potentially endless activity.¹³ In Michel Foucault's famous terms there is an 'infinite relationship' between language and painting.¹⁴ Donald Davidson is drier, but no less telling:

How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.¹⁵

Because of this, as writers on description in art history have long recognized, even the lengthiest and most seemingly thorough description of a work will only ever have picked out a certain number of features of that work, with interpretation inevitably focusing on that limited set of features. Other disciplines have acknowledged the point in their own ways. In relation to films David Bordwell has spoken of these features that form the basis of interpretation as ‘cues’, ‘textual features’, or ‘units’.¹⁶ Analytic philosophy of art prefers to speak in terms of what can be done with the ‘properties’ of artworks.¹⁷ The important point here is that even a focus on a defined set of features of the work ultimately doesn’t narrow down or delimit interpretation, as contexts can be used in interpretations to transform these apparently stable features in all manner of creative and unexpected ways.

A standard use of contexts in art writing, then, is in what might be called *redescription*. In this practice a feature of an artwork is described in relation to a context, in the process turning it into a more elaborate feature than it might otherwise have seemed.¹⁸ At its most obvious, redescription might pick out and describe a feature of an artwork, then introduce the context and subsequently redescribe that feature, a process I call saw-toothed contextualization. But at the other end of the spectrum the context may have been already introduced – sometimes so carefully that the reader will barely notice – so that what seems like an initial description is already a contextualized redescription. In this case we might say that contextualization is ‘pre-set’.

In La Font we have already seen the use of pre-set contextualization. In this mode at its most obvious the writer will open with an extensive contextualizing discussion. The writer can then give the impression that they are simply describing the artworks they deal with in an entirely natural way. The fact that they are really being interpreted *in light of the context* remains only implicit. The mode is extremely powerful in that it gives a sense of offering mere description, of seeing the works as they simply *are*, while all the same quietly shaping the works in the service of that writer’s particular goals. The technique is one employed by writers who are often thought to disavow contexts just as much as those who openly embrace contexts. Reading avowedly contextualist writings like the early Marxist art histories of Friedrich Antal and Arnold Hauser, we

might be well aware that every artwork will be interpreted as a clear outcome or 'reflection' of the foregiven context of economic structure and class struggle: the 'monumental naturalism of Massaccio' with its 'emphasis on the clarification of spatial relationships and proportions' shows the reaction of the emergent 'plain and industrious' bourgeoisie against the late-Gothic decorative exuberance favoured in contemporary aristocratic taste (Fig. 3.3).¹⁹ Such precontextualization can be equally obvious in the case of the philosophizing art critics of the same moment, as when the philosophical position of Herbert Read or Jean-Paul Sartre just so happens to translate perfectly into the work.²⁰ But exactly the same moulding of artworks to fit personal views can be true of the 'formalist' writers allegedly focused on strictly artistic and visual concerns. Alois Riegl, or Roger Fry, or Clement Greenberg, are as likely to rely on a general contextualizing discussion of forms of viewing, or a particular kind of attention to pictorial space, or the artistic challenges raised by earlier artworks, which then animates everything they have to say about the works of art they go on to deal with.²¹

The use of context is even more obvious in the inverse of pre-contextualization, 'saw-toothed' contextualization. This technique is a parallel to the form of history writing Roland Barthes termed 'zig-zag or saw-toothed history', in which the historian jumps back in time from new elements in the narrative to give their prehistory, before continuing where they had left off.²² In the case of art-historical interpretation writers will present a feature of the work, then go back to offer a contextualization of the feature. Redescribed in light of the context the initially confusing feature turns out to solve an apparent interpretative problem. Pointing out that figures and scenes around the edges of texts in the Freer *Divan* of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir have no clear connection with the text, an interpretation moves back to discuss manuscripts on 'so-called Chinese painted paper' with tinted and gold-painted leaves, suggesting the influence of China on a new and purely decorative relationship between text and image seen in subsequent years in Timurid, Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal manuscripts (Fig. 3.4).²³ Noting that 'the black man is dressed more fashionably than the others' and his gesture 'contrasts sharply' with the actions of the crew, an interpretation of John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* turns to a ten-page history of American connections to the slave trade and the abolitionist movement that 'gave particular meaning to Copley's picture'.²⁴ The sparse wooden chair in Édouard Manet's illustration of Edgar Allen Poe's *Le Corbeau*, which seems to contradict the stuffed velvet seat of the verse, leads another interpretation into an intricate discussion of the very possibility



Fig. 3.3. Masaccio, *The Virgin and Child*. Egg tempera on wood, c. 1426, 134.8 × 73.5 cm. National Gallery, London.

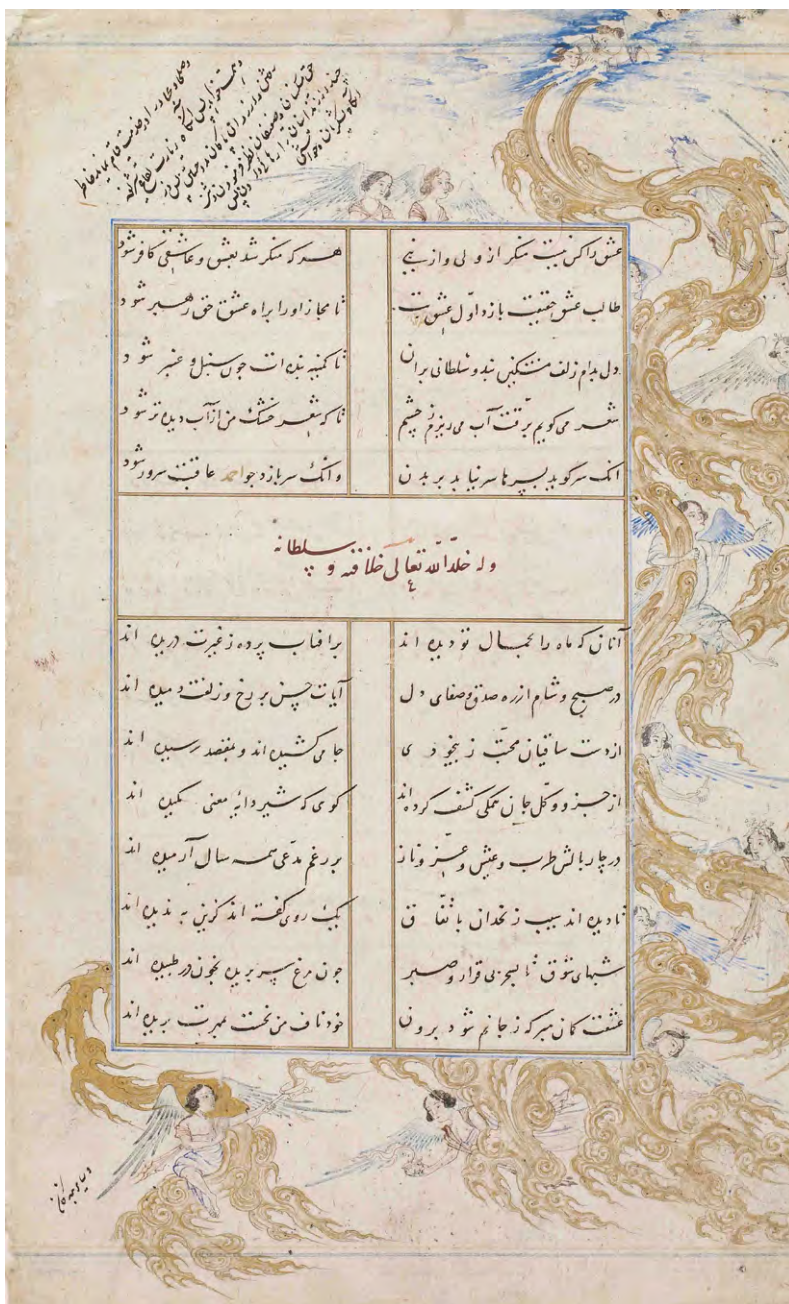


Fig. 3.4. Folio from a Divan by Sultan Ahmad Jalayir (Angels Amidst Clouds), c. 1400. Ink, colour and gold on paper, 29.5 × 20.4 cm. Freer Gallery of Art.

of private language and meaning as raised not just by philosophers later in the century but also by Poe and by Manet in this artwork.²⁵ The ‘actual kidnappings’ that unexpectedly resulted from Marta Minujín’s staged but chaotic *Kidnapping* performance leads an interpretation back to Argentina’s ‘worsening political situation’ in the early 1970s that included the deadly clashes at Ezeiza airport upon Juan Peron’s return from exile in June 1973, just one month before *Kidnapping* took place, the artwork’s contemporary ‘connotations’ depending on its reproduction of the threat of violence within what was ultimately the safe space of institutional structures (Fig. 3.5).²⁶



Fig. 3.5. Marta Minujín, *Kidnapping*, 1973. Performed at the Museum of Modern Art, as part of the Summergarden programme, August 3 and 4, 1973. Courtesy of the Marta Minujín Archive, Buenos Aires.

Saw-toothed *history* is a venerable technique that Barthes noted as far back as Herodotus, but saw-toothed *contextualization* has found especial popularity in the writing of later-twentieth-century academic art history (regardless of subject matter or place of publication).²⁷ Thomas Crow could write in 2006 that every single article published in the *Art Bulletin*, then the major art history journal in the US and arguably the world, ultimately was an example of the social history of art whether it acknowledged it or not.²⁸ But such a generalization really depends on the equation of contextualization with social history. It would be more accurate to say that the majority were dependent on saw-toothed contextualization, as an increasingly standardized mode for how academic art history deals with its images. It should all the same be stressed that 'pre-set' and 'saw-toothed' are abstractions at two notional poles of a spectrum. The two strategies alternatively lean towards context-first or feature-first forms of redescription, but they are alternated between and combined over the course of most interpretations rather than found in strictly isolated or 'pure' form. Friedrich Antal's *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*, for instance, practises pre-set contextualization in spending four chapters on matters of economic, social, cultural, and intellectual history before finally turning to chapters on art.²⁹ But it also practises saw-toothed contextualization in immediately opening with a comparison between paintings by Masaccio and Gentile da Fabriano that leads from the works to a contextualization that will make sense of them. Both strategies, ultimately, are variations of the same basic operation of *using* context to do things with works of art.

Reconstruction and context as plausible limit

Things remain relatively under control when art historical interpretation aims at reconstruction of how artworks might once have been for makers and users in the past. Here, interpreters have to reason both for themselves and in dialogue with others. The key test of a context is simply whether, assessing the artwork in the present together with knowledge of the resources available for making and using artworks within its particular culture, the context seems like it would have significantly impacted how the artwork was experienced and understood by its past makers and users. Vague as it is, this way of describing the test nonetheless raises two very specific issues. First, in reconstructing artworks in particular contexts we are always dealing with plausibility rather than proof. Because we are inevitably inferring based on only partial evidence there is no possibility

that ‘proof’ could be found for any one context, however convinced we might be, and no hope of assembling a complete set of contexts that would fully and finally place the work of art ‘back’ into its original surroundings. And second, our sense of what is plausible will depend on our own general theories (even if intuitive and never actually articulated) of how broadly contexts might come to affect how people engaged with works in the past – essentially our own view of *what it is or was* to make and to experience a work of art. We see this as clearly as anywhere in the model of art-historical ‘reconstruction’ or ‘re-enactment’ offered by Michael Baxandall, held up in recent times as ‘a kind of ideal of art history as it has fashioned itself in the past 40 years’, his reflections – as one prominent art historian has recently written – ‘map[ping] out what many art historians (certainly in my acquaintance) think about their practice, and would likely say themselves if they had his “extraordinary rhetorical alertness”’.³⁰

In this model, artworks are to be treated as concrete responses to particular problems in particular circumstances. The art historian works by reconstructing the *problem* faced by the artist, the *resources* available within the ‘culture’ of the time, and a verbal *description* of the work of art itself.³¹ Our developing sense of artist, culture, and described artwork are continually set against one another, allowing the interpreter to reason about what in the past was ‘conceptualizable’ in conformation with all three (Fig 3.6). Baxandall gave as his primary example the work carried out by Benjamin Baker on the Forth Bridge. For this Baxandall drew up a group of contexts or ‘ranges of resources offered the agent’ that divided roughly into issues around medium, available models, and aesthetics: such as the need for the bridge to resist side winds, the new availability of steel, and Baker’s statement of his own ‘expressive functionalism’.

Yet in laying out the model Baxandall elsewhere pushed at the limits of plausible reconstruction, as when he connected the empiricist philosophy of John Locke and the painting of J. S. Chardin, in a case used to ‘discuss how far we can think ... about relations between the visual interest of pictures and (taking the extreme case) the systematic thought, science or philosophy, of the culture they come from’ (Fig. 3.7). In discussing Chardin’s *Lady Taking Tea*, Baxandall took certain visual oddities in the painting as a spur to look closer into the puzzle of ‘Distinctness’, as ‘one corner of an eighteenth-century web of preoccupation with Lockeanism’. Baxandall had no relevant statements from Chardin to draw on, and rejected art criticism as an entirely unhelpful guide to how the works were seen at the time.³² Perceptual issues of focus and visual attention, Baxandall nonetheless concluded, were ordinary enough in Chardin’s general culture and in the concerns of

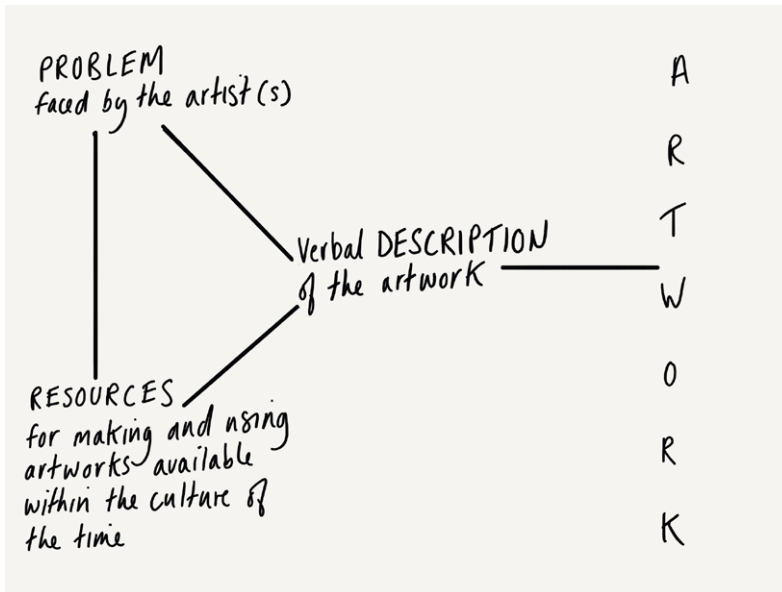


Fig. 3.6. Context as Plausible Limit: Michael Baxandall's 'triangle of re-enactment'. Illustration: Alice Feaver. [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

artists that they could reasonably be supposed to be resources that a painter might draw on. Importantly the pictorial traditions and contemporary artistic discourses of interest to Chardin also provided specific artistic means to engage with these perceptual issues, so that they might genuinely claim to have affected the look of the work.

In the case of the Forth Bridge we see a fairly obvious and secure sense of the resources available within the given culture, 'artistic' and 'technical' as they mostly were. In Chardin we are dealing with concepts that, according to Baxandall, had widespread cultural currency in the eighteenth century and which we can therefore read into paintings, even if we can only link them indirectly to the artist's frame of reference. The controversial nature of the Chardin demonstration reminds us why art history has often stuck to more obviously 'artistic' contexts as closely as possible. As one sceptical writer expertly summed up the problem: 'The fact is that theories about the visual world, even new ones energetically debated, need not have any great impact on how we see, or how we usually feel about that world', and furthermore that perhaps this desire for an exciting context had led the art historian to ignore the 'qualities ... central to the art he is writing about'.³³ If we're after ways that the artwork was taken by makers and users in the past, would we not prioritize things



Fig. 3.7. Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, *A Lady Taking Tea*, 1735. Oil on canvas, 81 × 99 cm. Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow.

obviously central to the taking of the work, and would that not be the visual, artistic, and technical contexts that unarguably connect to how the work was made and seen?

As we see throughout the present book, the move beyond the most obvious ‘art’ context or contexts is a perennial feature of interesting art-historical interpretation. Nonetheless, ways of cutting this cake are one of the major historical dividing lines between schools of art history. Different art historians have often drawn attention to different features of works of art depending on their preferences: style for one, subject matter for another. But even more important is the way that different thinkers have come down on the question of what cultural resources could have been used by the artist to make the work look and be experienced a particular way. What contexts, that is, meaningfully *show up* in the way that the artwork was for makers and users in the past?³⁴ This is the ground contested by ‘theories and methods’, even if we might not always acknowledge it: differing claims about which historical and conceptual information should be prioritized as determinant of an artwork’s proper ‘context’.

All of this provides at once the basic starting point for, and challenge to, novel art histories: how to show that contexts (race, ecology, materiality) not only did show up for makers and users at the time, but could conceivably have been powerfully important for how the works in question were taken. It also poses an ethical quandary for those who desire to push an overarching context in the name of committed or interesting interpretation, for the same creativity that can use a ‘theory and method’ to see something new in a work can just as well serve as a homogenizing tool that screens out so much else that might be there to be seen and said. Trading in examples such as the prevalence of Lockeanism in the eighteenth-century perception of interior scenes can distract from the seriousness of the point, as can be seen by briefly shifting focus entirely to a case in more recent artistic production. Talking of ‘what we call “black art” in the United States’, Darby English has drawn attention to how interpreters of the work of African-American artists have again and again assumed that so-called ‘black art’ must be addressed solely through the lens of race. Ignoring actual intentions and informing contexts, even well-meaning interpreters thus end up engaging in a kind of ‘tactical segregation’: filtering the work through what they take to be a ‘foreknown certainty such as “the black artist” or a “black experience”’, and in doing so reducing unique work after unique work to ‘another homogenizing reflection of African-American culture’.³⁵ This is a dramatic reminder that new – and even apparently or at one point politically progressive – contextualization can soon become a troubling habit, controlling what is said about artworks in ways that long passes without notice.

Depth reconstruction and context as limit without limits

Contexts are necessary to fix the identity and key features of works of art at particular moments.³⁶ But can there be a limit to which contexts are brought to bear in interpretation? The writers and artists of the early-eighteenth century who worried about the shifting nature of pictorial meaning were dealing with what they took to be at least resolvable cases of ambiguity: with a change of title the artwork presented one definite facial expression or person or story rather than another. Yet as the doctrine of art as a reflection of its time took hold over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, such clear cases of ambiguity seemed to shift into almost limitless plurality.³⁷ Of the many figures linked to this change – from Winckelmann through to Goethe and on to Ruskin and