

Uneasiness in the Museum: the Affective Subjectivity and Openness of Art Interpretation

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Abstract

This thesis is a part of my journey of coming to terms with the realization that we are not static beings and thus, neither our creations nor our interpretational processes can ever remain final. As my foundation, I use Jacques Derrida's understanding of the supplement, Sara Ahmed's theory on the power of emotion, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's understanding of artistic hermeneutics interconnected with the general theme of uneasiness. By using the experience of viewing, interpreting, and internalizing art specifically in the space of the museum as my medium, I problematize three interconnected supposed dichotomies: art and natural language, the humanities and sciences, and emotion and rationality. I use the three theories to begin the process of understanding that the meaning of art is never fixed, neither in a specific context nor to a specific person. I argue that the process of interpretation is not, and can never be, completely satisfied or complete. Art is meaningful because it changes us and it encourages us to do the work to remember that we can be changed. While this understanding may initially generate uneasiness, the conversations we have with each other can alleviate this feeling through the realization that we are not alone in our experiences.

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“To recognize that we touch one another in language seems particularly difficult in a society that would have us believe that there is no dignity in the experience of passion, that to feel deeply is to be inferior, for within the dualism of Western metaphysical thought, ideas are always more important than language.” – bell hooks

Introduction

I was watching an episode of one of my favorite tv shows, *Survivor*, and one of the contestants on the “Brain” tribe boasted: “We are overly analytical. We know that it's best to gather facts, think it through without panicking, reassess, reanalyze, and emotions are just a waste of time and energy.” We constantly praise this type of academic genius who is able to act without emotion. In the same way that natural sciences are valued much more than the social sciences and the social sciences more so than the humanities, in salary and job appeal. Stepping away from the rational, the empirical, the clearly observable, is frightening. It is no longer what we are taught to do. The ideal intelligentsia is a neutral body, able to think systematically and rationally.

This premise is inherently problematic in many ways. It stagnates our ability to connect with each other and the natural world. We need everything to be understandable, categorizable, and static. We believe the work we do should remain separate from us. It should remain unbiased¹ and we should resist changing as a result of the work we do. Thinking of life in this way prevents us from accessing the parts of ourselves that separate us from computers or machines—the parts which make us human. We have become caught up in our scientific progress and claim, or hope, that all interpretation and derivation of knowledge can occur via the scientific method.

¹ This is evidenced in the example of double blind experiments.

However, perhaps the natural sciences and humanities are more similar than we are prone to believe. In addition, perhaps rationality and emotionality are not actually inherently contradictory but rather, supplementary. In fact, one can not exist without the other. We are, then, wrong to believe the task of natural science is to find rational, observable fact while the focus of the humanities is simply affective. This would imply that there is no knowledge to be found nor produced in the study of philosophy or literature. We can think of the affective as knowledge producing, and the natural sciences as linked to the affective as well. In fact, if everything in the history of science that was believed to be true, has now been proven false, it seems impractical to assume that the knowledge the sciences produce now, is undoubtedly true.

Perhaps certain emotions have a role in the natural sciences as well. Physics, astronomy, or marine biology, for example, hold a certain awe factor that draws attention. There is something attractive about sights and ideas that are not fully rationalizable or understandable in concepts. That which is completely unknown is inspiring and this inspiration produces emotion. We then turn to observation and experiments to understand the phenomenon even better. Emotions have a place in science, but only ones which drive us to curiosity and productivity. It is still true that every premise in the natural sciences or mathematics is called a “theorem”—always still potentially revisable.

What does it mean to understand every text whether it be a theorem, a book, or a piece of art as an object of interpretation which remains open, never completely satisfied or complete? This thesis attempts to answer this question, particularly within the setting of the contemporary art museum. It seems impossible to think of ourselves as static subjects if the world is unstable around us, and thus, it becomes natural to conclude that the work we produce, whether it be

pieces of writing² or a professional work of art can never remain complete, neither in production nor in interpretation.

As my foundation, I use Jacques Derrida's understanding of the supplement, Sara Ahmed's theory on the power of emotion, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's understanding of artistic hermeneutics, to try to understand the intricacies of the experience of viewing, interpreting, and internalizing art particularly in the space of the museum. I use the theme of uneasiness and its inherent subjectivity as my connecting thread to problematize three dichotomies: art and natural language, the humanities and sciences, and emotion and rationality. Specifically, I look at the fear of the supplement and the role of emotions to understand the uneasiness we feel in the museum space. Ultimately, I draw the conclusion that this uneasiness can be rectified through discourse with others. By holding a philosophical disposition of questioning in a meaningful manner, we are able to form intimate bonds with each other to heal our mutual uneasiness.

From Derrida we can understand every text, which includes both art pieces and the excerpts of natural language which accompany the pieces, as open and always available for new interpretation. We see Derrida's understanding of moving away from logocentrism specifically in the museum—the art is interpreted through the excerpts of natural language which accompany the pieces, and neither the art nor the text comes necessarily before the other. In addition, neither is fully capable of replacing the other, even though this fear might remain. This fear of the supplement in the art museum must be thought of in conjunction with the general fear of navigating the elite space. The idea that there is a right way to experience the museum is related to the fear of the supplement replacing the original.

² A senior thesis, for example

I am in support of Ahmed's argument that emotion ought not to be thought of as subordinate to rational judgment, because especially when it comes to the interpretation of art, I am not sure they can ever truly be separated from one another. We have subordinated the role of emotion in art because we still hold the premise that emotion and rationality are intrinsically oppositional to one another. This subordination was not necessarily intentional, but it persists nonetheless. The world of art has become increasingly rationalized. In the Western world, the interpretation of art is now thought of in the same way as mathematics—a process of rules that ought to be taught, learned, and followed. These rules dictate how we perceive and understand art as well as limit the scope to who has access to the art in the first place.

Gadamer remarks that the interpretation of art is an individual process but, as a socially constituted individual, not one that can ever be analyzed separately from the world. I use the three theories to begin the process of understanding that the meaning of art is never fixed, neither in a specific context nor to a specific person. Art is meaningful because it changes us and it encourages us to do the work to remember that we can be changed. By reconceptualizing natural language as a supplement rather than an opposition to art, I also examine and problematize the dichotomy between emotion and rationality³. By thinking of emotion and rationality as supplements rather than as oppositional elements, we can, perhaps, move about the museum in a less fearful, more fulfilled way.

My paradigm example is one of the supplementation between two dimensional, visual art (painting or drawing in particular) and natural language. When I enter an art museum, I often find myself spending more time reading the wall text next to an art piece compared to the time I

³ While not directly cited, authors and philosophers Bell Hooks and Maggie Nelson have served as my inspiration in their genre-blurring expeditions.

spend looking at the art piece itself. In the process, I fear that I am going about the experience of art interpretation the wrong way. Shouldn't I be spending more time with the art piece itself? Spending more time with the wall texts feels inauthentic somehow, and yet, without the wall text, the piece seems incomplete.

While not every wall text is merely a description of what is occurring in the piece of art, they often act as a supplement to the art.⁴ Clearly a description does not encapsulate all that the piece is. A museum full of merely wall text would not be desirable at all. On the other hand, I can imagine going to a museum without any wall text would be jarring in another way. We feel as though without the wall text we are at a loss of understanding. We have a reliance on the wall text to translate the art work for us. Or perhaps we look to the description or wall text to reaffirm what we already believe to be “true” or rather, correct our own perceived “misunderstanding.” What is it about the wall text that we gravitate towards?

I do not wish for this thesis to be a prescriptive one for museums or for art critics, nor for the rest of us, navigating the museums ourselves, but rather an opening for rethinking and questioning the ways in which we navigate spaces where art is intentionally exhibited and discussed. Art prompts us to change the way we think. I believe the goal of art interpretation ought to be to reach towards knowledge but only through a process which holds the potential to open up more questions—questions about our relational selves and the world around us.⁵ In my

⁴ Similar to the wall text, the text in the margin of a Shakespeare play adds more context and makes the “original” text more readable to a newer, perhaps less familiar, audience. In addition, perhaps we ought to look at the example of a food critic who begins to articulate the distinctions in taste they can perceive. This isn't necessarily about making the food more accessible, per say, but it is about the capability of articulating a sensory taste into natural language in a valuable or useful way.

⁵ I often use other types of art (namely music or food) as an example to make a point clearer, but the points are not specific to the examples themselves. If my reasoning applies to music or food, I contend that it applies to painting and other forms of visual art as well.

conclusion, I offer additional propositions for what this questioning disposition can provide for us.

Role of Museums

At one point, the purpose of museums moved from education for the public to becoming about the storage and preservation of priceless objects, seemingly for the objects' sake. Museums are increasingly concerned with the elongation of life of the artworks themselves rather than appealing to the audience that attend the exhibitions. The art works themselves are viewed as static in meaning: there exists a certain, correct, way of interacting with and interpreting these artworks and the qualified people are taught how to do so.

This has advanced to the extent that other forms of experiencing art are viewed as cheap or inauthentic. For example, *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, which took form in several cities across the United States in 2021-2022, received unfavorable reviews from cultural critics. Jason Farago from the *New York Times* belittles the experience by noting that we might have heard of it from Instagram or the “Netflix indignity called ‘Emily in Paris.’” The experience took the form of a giant carpeted room with walls covered top-to-bottom with giant screens. The screens showcased an animated version of many Van Gogh’s paintings with classical music played in surround sound. Before one stepped foot into the art space, the line to enter snaked through a series of large texts about Van Gogh’s early life as a person and as an artist. It was far from a “traditional” art venue and actually significantly more expensive than admission prices to most museums. And still, this experience was considered less worthy than its white walled, framed images, counterpart.

However, fascinatingly, Farago ultimately comes to the same conclusion as I do here. He wonders what it is about this experience that has attracted millions of people to stand under these screen based optical illusions—“And if audiences find that quality more immediately here than they do in our traditional institutions, maybe we should be asking why. Have our museums and galleries played down too much the emotional impact of the art they show?” (Farago). This opens up context for the ultimate question for my thesis: What is the role of emotion in the interpretation of art and how does it play a role in the conclusion that such interpretation must always remain open?

With education within and through museum spaces becoming more prominent, we see an evident shift of perspective of the value and purpose of the museum space. While museums were used and kept exclusively by and for the bourgeoisie elite, they are now becoming a space of learning for everyone, despite their backgrounds. However, even though museums still often restrict themselves by requiring high admission prices, these rules have been slightly shifted. In addition, many schools and universities have galleries which are either free or significantly subsidized for their students and, often, for the general public as well. For example, the Philadelphia Museum of Art will host evenings and certain days, which are “Pay What You Wish” which allows for anyone to enter the museum for as little as one cent.

If you choose to visit the museum during these evenings, specifically after 5pm on Friday, you experience a museum in a wholly different way. Music is blasting (different genres depending on which week you visit), cocktails are served, and the space is absolutely packed with groups of friends, couples on first dates, and parents with their children, all eager to see Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* in person, for the first time. For me, Friday evenings in the PMA are much more about people watching than they are about seeing the art itself. The casual way in which

people carry themselves on these special nights as opposed to the rest of the week is thrilling. Bodies are strewn upon the central grand staircase and visitors' voices are held at normal speaking volume as opposed to the usual whispers. Experiences such as these prompt us to rethink the binaries we think through—spaces designated for academic conversation are no longer separate from spaces for emotional interaction. The lines between the art and ourselves blur.

In agreement with Rika Burnham, Elliott Kai-Kee, and David Carrier, I find value in making the art museum more accessible and available to the general public. The “Enlightenment dream,” Burnham and Kai-Kee write about, depicts an idealized museum space in which “galleries are not primarily considered places where art historical information is transferred...” but instead are “redefined as places where conversation takes place around works of art and where the project of interpretation is constantly enacted,” (Burnham 11). If we look at the intention of Albert C. Barnes, the founder of the Barnes Foundation and the curator behind the Barnes Museum, we see that dream echoed as well. The art he collected was originally only for educational purposes, not to be viewed or bought by the wealthy elite.

If we want the purpose of art museums to continue to shift and their intended audience to change, we must hold the presupposition that the interpretation of art always remains open. If we believe that this interpretation is closed or static, we prevent this goal from truly becoming a reality. The alternative would require the intention of the artist to be preserved and the only interpretation taught. This would inadvertently limit the museum space to those who have received a formal education and are specifically interested and trained in a certain way of thinking of art and the world. In the following section, I examine how the subjective nature of the process of art interpretation promotes the argument that interpretation can never be static or complete.

Subjectivity of Art Interpretation

In any discussion of aesthetics and judgment, emotion must be taken into consideration. It would be inadequate and inaccurate to write about aesthetics without also discussing pleasure (and disgust and anger). We desire to consider and return to art because it makes us feel. In a different way in which chocolate is reliably pleasurable everytime, we gravitate towards art even when it may not evoke joy. Perhaps it evokes something different each time it is experienced—in the same way perhaps, that music sounds best when experiencing a recent breakup.

We can also examine this instability of meaning through the changing of contexts around an art piece. Graffiti signifies something very different when it is painted on the side of a bridge in a city compared to when it has been extracted and placed in a museum in white walls. The music a gallery plays while people are viewing the pieces impacts the meaning of the exhibition and pieces placed in a cathedral will connote something different than if they are placed in a mosque or in a “secular” space. None of these settings are actually “neutral” because they all provide context and thus, influence meaning.

Art has the ability to prompt an association with memory and feeling. Any attempt to put these associations into natural language always falls short.⁶ The value of art is not good or bad

⁶ I am sure many of us can think of examples in which hearing a certain song has brought us back in time or the way a poem or painting has invoked feelings within us that were new, surprising, and indescribable. The most apt example that comes to my mind is in the film *Ratatouille*. There is a scene in which the main character eats a bite of cheese and a juicy strawberry at the same time. The screen turns black and the viewer is transported into the mind of the rat, now filled with sparks of yellow and swooshes of pink which turns into a beautiful firework and glowing orbs of light. I consider cooking and food in general to be an art form and in this scene we see a combination of flavors which evokes an emotion so strong that is indescribable in natural language. The main character can not describe this feeling or taste to his brother and we as viewers rely on color and movement for it to make sense to us. Art describing other art comes much closer to translating what the original provoked than natural language could.

but rather one that prompts change within ourselves. The presence or lack of natural language surrounding art is meaningful either way. It causes an opening up of questions and, as a result, a path towards knowledge. Art is also unique in the way that it is meaningful each time we interact with it. Unlike facts of knowledge, which may only have an impact the first time we learn them, art remains interesting and valuable even in repetition—there has to be a reason that a song appears hundreds of times in a person’s annual Spotify Wrapped. There is always something more to be seen and learned when we experience art again, because the meaning changes, even just subtly, everytime. This understanding of art and the holding of it in opposition to rationality is potentially our initial mistake. Perhaps similar to facts of knowledge, the viewing of art changes the way we see the world following the experience. I am then prompted to wonder, in what ways do art pieces stick with us?

In Ahmed’s discussion of disgust she claims, incorrectly, that disgust is only associated with objects that can be touched or tasted and consumed. She forgets that visual art, experienced simply through the eyes, can certainly evoke feelings of disgust as well. Perhaps these feelings are still only evoked because when we see something disgusting, we are unwillingly prompted to think about what it would be like to touch it, with our hands or with our tongues. But nevertheless, we are disgusted. Ahmed remarks that disgust inevitably leads to a distancing from the object—a recoiling of the body. While this physical distancing seems accurate, the object is not necessarily easily forgotten in the same way. We may step back, but the piece sticks with us.

Art affects us, whether it is beautiful or horrifying. Even art that brings negative feelings attracts us in a certain way. We may not want to return to that piece, but whether we like it or not, that piece sticks with us—“To be disgusted is after all *to be affected by what one has rejected*” (Ahmed 86). When we form an impression of a work of art, the work of art also

impresses upon us. We are impacted by the art and the meaning we derive from the experience is an individual process. Art, both the creation and the viewing, is personal in a unique way. When we come into contact with art, “we leave it carrying away in our consciousness something which we didn’t have before...what we take with us—on the most profound level—is the memory of the artist’s way of looking at the world” (Berger 96). In the same way that language both shapes and exemplifies the way we view the world, we take a bit of the artist (or at least how the artist sees the world) with us. Neither the effects of nor the influences on art and language can be separated from our beings in the world nor from each other. Art and language inevitably are both molders and products of our view.

In his essay, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” Gadamer reminds us that the interpretation of art is a deeply phenomenological one— “[Art] possesses a mysterious intimacy that grips our entire being, as if there were no distance at all and every encounter with it were an encounter with ourselves” (Gadamer 1). He emphasizes the presence of art and the importance of not privileging the “original.” While the historicity of the artwork has some meaning, it certainly does not encompass all that exists in the meaning of the artwork or our experience with it. Tradition matters in the art world but not exclusively so. Art does not only exist in the time period it was created. The way a visitor of the Louvre interprets the Mona Lisa today, is certainly going to be different than a visitor one hundred years ago, and even more different from the first people who saw the painting in the 1500s. The discourse which now surrounds the painting, influences our view. So do the tens of iPhone cameras in front of the painting that one would see if one were to visit the Louvre today. This is not necessarily a clouding of the interpretation or experience, because there is no pure or original interpretation that one is precluded from viewing. The interpretation of art is discursive in nature.

Gadamer argues in favor of Kant's point of a necessary call to a universality when asserting judgments of beauty and contends that this judgment must not be drawn as a result of reasons or concepts. While I certainly hold the second point to be true, I am not convinced that a call to universality is necessary in art. Universal judgments and rules may be required in the domains of math or science in order to make progress. While the rules can, and certainly do change and evolve, as new discoveries are made, there must be a baseline of understanding that we all agree on in order to make any sort of progress at all. I am not sure this is as necessary in the world of art and art judgment.

The interpretation of art is an individual process, and a personal one—"The artist is not interested in world literature or art as a cultural puree; he is a local character, interested in local details. He thrives on differences" (Perricone 13). This is not to say that art has no value for the non-local, but rather that the meaning is not meant to be read or understood by everyone. Art is meaningful in that it is unique for each individual; it is not universal nor neutral. The differences it produces are integral and beautiful. However, while the interpretation of art is an independent process, it is not a purely solo one. All people are intrinsically social beings and, as Ahmed credits Durkheim in arguing, "emotion is not what comes from the individual body, but is what holds or binds the social body together" (Ahmed 9). When it comes to emotion, the binary between the internal and the external is slippery.

Gadamer proposes that the process of interpretation, similar to the process of experiencing emotion, is constitutive of being rather than an autonomous action one can take part in and separate oneself from. "Interpretation," Gadamer writes, "seems to be a genuine determination of existence rather than an activity or an intention" (Gadamer 71). Existence, in this sense, must be interpreted as fluid, rather than a static, or final state of being. Interpretation

surely determines what the artwork is and what it can be, but both the interpreting process and the nature of existence, remain revisable and incomplete. Both the art pieces and ourselves remain eternally unstable, always played upon and constituted by the scenarios we find ourselves in.

Emotion can not be separated from the being; it constitutes the self and provides a filter on the world. For example, one may contend music sounds better while experiencing a break up and ice cream tastes sweeter and creamier when in love. Emotion can not be separated from the interpretation of the world and the objects in it. If we take this argument as our premise, it is impossible for emotionality and rationality to be binary opposites because this would imply that it is possible to have one without the other. Instead, we must understand emotion and rationality to be supplements: additive and complementary rather than contradictory. The fusing of this binary can be unsettling.

Ultimately, I have decided to use uneasiness as my connecting thread in this thesis because of its inherent subjectivity. Uneasiness, although usually influenced by the external world, is deeply personal, similar to the process of art interpretation. As we have explored, the interpretation of art is a subjective process and filtered by the emotions and past experiences we enter the space with. For many reasons, however, we may be uncomfortable with this reading. In the following sections, I explain the tensions and interconnectedness of other types of uneasiness that may exist as one navigates an art museum. Until this point, we have also been ignoring the potentially neutralizing role of natural language in the museum. In the following section, I examine the function and position of natural language in the museum and in art criticism.

Fear of the Supplement

The supplement, according to Derrida, is both an additional as well as a potentially representational element. Derrida gives the example of art which acts as a supplement to nature. The supplement is an excess, a representation of what already exists in the external world (*Of Grammatology* 144). In this example, art threatens to copy and take the place of the natural and yet they both need each other to be meaningful. Art and nature are required to coexist—they are not opposites but are actually representational in relation to each other. We can consider a painting and a description of it in natural language that accompanies it, either in the museum itself as a wall text, or in an art magazine or museum website as our paradigm example of the supplement. The art piece and the accompanying text work together to produce something unique. They are the text and the paratextual. In the same way that the prologue, table of contents, and author's biography on the back cover, constitute and add meaning to the book itself, the natural language surrounding a piece of art acts in a similar way.

The text in the margin of a Shakespeare play and the notes in between lines of a recipe play a similar role. These paratextual elements play a significant role in defining what art is and why and how it is meaningful. I am not sure anyone would claim that reading a piece of art criticism is the same as visiting the museum oneself, but I am certain that many of us are guilty of acting as if this were the case. In a world where there are too many events to take part in and too many galleries to visit, it is much easier to just explore *The New Yorker's* "Cultural Comment" section and call it a day. Once again, natural language serves as a supplement to the art. It can exist in art's absence and adds to its presence. It threatens to take the place of the exhibit, but does not quite do so.

How, then, does the wall text affect the way we navigate an art museum? There have been instances where I have worried that I am spending too much time reading the wall text rather than looking at the art pieces themselves, or similarly, being afraid to fall back upon the wall text for support or understanding and instead forcing myself to stare at the art piece a little longer, in hopes something meaningful will miraculously jump out at me. We uncover a similar fear—the fear of the supplement replacing the original, when we examine the role of wall text and art criticism.

Wall text is often offered in museums without the signature of the author or any indication of where it came from. Often on white walls, it is offered as the unbiased, neutral understanding of the collection or the individual piece. It often lacks words relating to emotion and rather offers historical or contextual data and background. As an unchanging, solo object, the wall text supports a narrative that there is a singular truth to be found within art and that there exists a certain correct process to uncovering this truth.

We wish for art to be meaningful in itself, and by itself. It ought to speak for itself and remain outside the mundane and unrefined realm of discourse. The fear of this supplementary element is produced when the natural language is viewed as more truthful or accurate than the artwork itself. Often people who deem themselves having an inadequate understanding of art history or the rules of art, might turn to the wall text to realign or fix their own view. The natural language begins to tell us what to see and how to see it. We change our first perspective and align it with the new one based on what we have been told. We have become convinced that there must be only one way of looking at the art and it is the critic, art historian, or museum worker who holds the authority in this act. Thus, we open up a conversation about expertise, which the wall text poses to act in for. In most, if not all subjects that humanity deals with, we

hold to be true that there exist experts in each field who are more knowledgeable, more capable, and have worked with the material longer than the rest of the population. We rely on these experts to understand what is correct and, in terms of art critics, what is worthy of our time and money.

Expertise ought to be thought of differently in the world of art. If we rely on the author, the critic, the museum wall text writer, to tell us the way to think, we miss the purpose of art entirely. In doing so, we restrict ourselves to the normative, often Western, view. We treat the critic as both a neutral body *and* an absolute expert. We have come to think of art in the same ways that we think of mathematics, or geography, or football—subjects which have rules that must be adhered to. The experts in these fields are those who know and have mastered the rules to the supreme level. They can follow the rules better than anyone else in their field and perhaps even have the natural ability to do so. We know better than to correct our math professors or football players because we know that we can not do better; we have something to learn. And yet, somehow, art critics and museum curators have been dubbed with a similar authority—they are, by nature, uncorrectable.

In many beginner level foreign language classes in the American education system, translation practices are conducted in a formulaic, almost mathematical, way. The feeling of “solving” a line of translation feels similar to completing a math problem correctly. It does not matter who is doing the translating, the answer should be the same. If the answer is the same, the original is no longer necessary. We wish for the author to be rational and non-emotional—not affected by the world around them. As this is not an ideal translation but rather a novice one, we come to the conclusion that museum wall text ought not to be thought of in this way either.

Alternatively, we can use Walter Benjamin's view of translation to better understand how natural language and art play off of each other. While he may be referring to the translation of texts into multiple languages, we can apply his metaphor to the compatibility of natural language and art. Benjamin writes, "so translation, instead of making itself resemble the meaning of the original, must lovingly, and in detail, fashion in its own language a counterpart to the original's mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language" (Benjamin 161). Essentially, there is something valuable in both the translation, or the supplement, and the original piece itself. They must work together to produce something new altogether. Benjamin makes the point that translation does not ignore the intention of the author or artist of the original but rather produces something different, but compatible with it.

There are many types of wall text that exist in museums and they differ by show, content, or curator. While I spend this thesis primarily focused on the type of wall text which acts as a description and/or interpretation⁷ of the painting, other types of wall texts act as supplements as well. Even simply minimal plaques with titles and artists influence how we interpret the piece as a whole. For example, if *The Starry Night* was instead titled *The Village* in reference to the imaginary collection of homes in the foreground, the piece would mean something entirely different to us, both in the viewing of it but also in the surrounding discourse.⁸ Similarly, knowing the name of the artist and thus their popularity and inferred gender or ethnicity may also affect the interpreting process as well.

⁷ As we will see later, I claim that any description is inherently interpretative. A purely neutral, non-interpretive description is not possible.

⁸ It might even be relevant for me to note that even though I have seen photos of *The Starry Night* at least tens of times, I could not even vividly remember what was in the foreground of the piece. This would certainly be different given an alternate title.

Thus, we are forced to come to the conclusion that any description is inherently interpretive, even when unintentional. For example, in the PMA, the painting *Path on the Island of Saint Martin, Vétheuil* by Claude Monet, is accompanied by the following wall text: “In this painting of a meadow, the deep green and blue strokes of the grass, dotted with delicate pink flowers, contrast with the flurry of brushwork depicting yellow wheat glistening in the summer sun.” While at first glance this may seem purely objective, it does in fact offer interpretation which affects the way a would viewer perceive the piece. If instead of glistening, the text read “the wheat decaying under sweltering sun” a viewer would understand the painting in a completely different light. The text adds meaning to the art piece and can not be thought of as separate from the interpreting experience nor is it ever neutral or objective.

Even the absence of wall text adds meaning. For example, the Glenstone Museum in the suburbs of Washington D.C., filled with abstract sculptures both outside in a grassy field, and inside amongst blank walls lacks wall text altogether. Their website reads, “Maps and minimal signage help direct you around the property, but there is no descriptive text. You are free to interpret Glenstone in your own way.” It seems as though they have attempted to create a “neutral” context so the pieces almost “speak for themselves.” We must note, however, that there can be no neutral context. These blank walls or the grassy field changes the meaning of the sculptures too. These blank walls or the grassy field changes the meaning of the sculptures too⁹.

In our attempt to separate art and the natural language associated with it, we repromote this hierarchical binary between the emotional and the rational. The untranslatable, sensory nature of art is held in opposition to the pure, neutral, academic nature of language. The articles

⁹ I have friends who have visited the museum who felt lost navigating the space. One friend even noted that the lack of any wall text meant that the art pieces possessed almost no value to her whatsoever. It was almost as if the meaning of the art pieces was incomprehensible without the wall text.

of criticism and the wall text hold the truth while the art piece holds something which is impenetrable, nonsensical to us. It makes us feel in a nonlinguistic, preconceptual manner—“The feeling does simply exist before the utterance, but becomes ‘real’ as an effect, shaping different kinds of actions and orientations” (Ahmed 13). Notions of truth are and continue to be disassociated with emotion and solely compatible with conceptual thought. In our new conception, we must understand that knowledge, in fact, produces and is produced by the physical, emotional sensations in our body—“knowledge is bound up with what makes us sweat, shudder, tremble...the skin surface where we touch and are touched by the world” (Ahmed 171).

The art work, then, can not exist meaningfully without the supplement which comes with it. I think ultimately we are forced to come to the conclusion that a description of a piece of art in natural language is not, in fact, a representation nor a translation. It is not equally meaningful on its own without the artwork in relation to it. It is also not capable of “standing in” for the artwork itself. In the same way, the artwork benefits from the natural description supplement. They inherently push and pull on each other, and it is this precise pushing and pulling that makes the entirety even more meaningful. This tension, however, remains meaningless without an interpreter who stands in relation to it. In the following section, I move away from the museum setting as an abstraction and examine the role and actions of the interpreter in this specific context.

Power of Emotion

I take the subordination of emotion, and its association with the marginalization or “othering” of the non-masculine or non-white as my premise to understand why we must move away from the emotion-rationality binary altogether. We believe the process of “translating” art

into natural language is in an attempt to rationalize it; to make it less emotional or phenomenological. In a society shaped by Western rationalist thought, emotion is always subordinate to systemized thought. Sara Ahmed writes, “Softness is narrated as a proneness to injury...To be emotional is to have one’s judgment affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (Ahmed 3). Any emotional response to art is not about connection with the artist, but connection with the self. Ironically, it might be argued that even though the purpose of the natural language supplement might be to separate itself from the emotional, it often influences one’s judgment even more than the art itself. The natural language, intentionally placed in relation to the works of art, inevitably shapes the way we view the art and the impression it makes upon us.

The devaluation of emotion is undoubtedly tied to the negative associations between emotions and femininity. As Ahmed writes, when we subordinate emotion, we “subordinate the feminine and the body...[women are] ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment” (Ahmed 3). De Beauvoir makes a similar distinction in her theory explaining the domination of women. In doing so, she essentially characterizes women as supplemental to men. The subject, she argues “asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object” (De Beauvoir 7). A man’s body, she asserts, is claimed to have meaning in itself, in isolation, while the female body is only meaningful in relation to the male. Often in philosophical or other academic works, women are assumed to be encompassed in the use of “general” male pronouns. If women, specifically, are mentioned, it is only in differentiation from man (Culler 166). However, despite this, the sexes are necessary to each other in order to form meaning as a cohesive pair. Ultimately, the possibility of adding a supplement implies that the “original” object was not complete to begin with (Culler 102).

Emotion, and allowing ourselves to truly feel that emotion, unsettles our sense of self. It causes a breaking of autonomy—we are acted upon by the external world in a non consensual manner. When a nation is associated with being soft, (“soft on crime”), writes Ahmed, a group or ideology is being associated with the feminine which has the potential to be nonconsensually harmed or invaded (Ahmed 2). The fear of emotion is tied to the fear of instability and a changing sense of self—“To be emotional is to have one’s judgment affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (Ahmed 3).

While it is unlikely that emotion can not be thought of apart from physical sensation, many theorists believe there are perhaps cognitive aspects to it as well. Some believe that negative emotions are actually associated with moral judgments—when something makes us angry or disgusted, that object (whether material or not) is bad or, according to Descartes, harmful to us (Ahmed 5). In addition, emotionality is associated with the prehuman, a past evolutionary state. Colonialist rhetoric often ascribes the “other” as having uncontrollable feelings and having tendencies that are nonrational and thus, less like humans but similar to animals. Thus, writes Ahmed, the fear of becoming emotional is tied to “not only the risk of becoming feminine, but also of becoming ‘less white’” (Ahmed 3).

However, if we step away from this hierarchy of emotions and rationality, we can focus on another: the hierarchy solely of emotions. While some are associated with productivity and “cultivation” others are associated with weakness. It ultimately comes down to, Ahmed argues, whether emotions can be controlled and whether they are permitted to exist in only certain conditions (Ahmed 3). I contend, as Ahmed does, the only way to uplift experiences and movements which center emotion, is not to critique the opposition and claim, instead, that these processes are not emotional but rational after all. We must actually move away from the binary

altogether. “We need to contest this understanding of emotion as ‘the unthought,’ just as we need to contest the assumption that ‘rational thought’ is unemotional, or that it does not involve being moved by others” (Ahmed 170). Awe, perhaps, is the way to make this leap.

Awe or wonder, in the context of science or not, is an emotion that can be held concurrently with masculinity. Wonder is associated with what is already given and can not be resisted because it is constitutive of our beings. It is not associated with weakness or instability, but rather acts as a motivating force. An object which brings wonder was unseen, untouched by anyone else. Wonder can be associated with the conquering of the so-called “New World” or with the desire to fly to the moon and implant a star-spangled stake in it.

Descartes asserts ‘wonder’ or awe, is the first emotion because it occurs in the complete lack of understanding of the object before us (Ahmed 179). It is unclear, still, whether the object will be pleasurable or painful, helpful or harmful. Awe exists in every subject, suggests Wittgenstein, because what is ordinary is not even noticed. It is in the unusual, the peculiar, in which wonder takes place because the object stands out– “Wonder is the precondition of the exposure of the subject to the world: we wonder when we are moved by that which we face” (Ahmed 179). Awe can be retained as powerful and morally good, because with awe, we are not at risk of becoming the other. It is not associated with the feminine or the pre- or sub-human because of its associations with science and nature. It exists only in certain contexts and can be channeled and used for productive purposes. While it still alerts us to the limitations of the human, it does not break us. It does not remind us that we are weak but instead informs us of the possibilities of accessing the knowledge just ahead of us.

The perception of art frequently brings about feelings of awe and wonder. Often, neither the subjects of the paintings nor the methods of their creation are immediately knowable or

understandable to us. In the viewing of a particularly intricate piece, we are forced to reckon with our own limits, both in interpretation and in skill. The mysteriousness and unknowability is inherent in the art piece. Thus, interpretation often necessitates wonder. In addition, when examining the emotional aspect of the interpretation of art, we must consider that the viewing of art alters and transforms who we are as beings. Among other emotions, it brings us awe and wonder—“The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar” (Gadamer 4). This is what makes art special and distinguishes it from simply other materiality and experiences which bring us pleasure. Art does not always reliably bring us pleasure. It brings us something new, and something different every time.

Thus if the interpretation of art is tied to the emotional, it must also be subjective. Contemplating the meaning of art is and ought to be an intrinsically, to a certain extent, individual process. I use the word contemplating rather than understanding because the latter presupposes a duality and finality. One either understands or they do not. Contemplation, on the other hand, is an ongoing process and a process one can come back to. Gadamer writes, “Thus our task is to understand the meaning of what it says and to make it clear to ourselves and others. Even the nonlinguistic work of art, therefore, falls within the province of the proper task of hermeneutics. It must be integrated into the self understanding of each person” (Gadamer 3).

The process is individual to the extent that it is produced by and also influences the phenomenological and emotional subjectivities of the person as well as the past inheritances of the person. However, it is not individual in the sense that a person’s interaction with art ought to be thought of as autonomous or separated from the rest of the world and the experiences of others. Throughout this thesis, I hold true that all persons are intrinsically social persons and

there is no way to remove a person from their social context, neither socially nor intellectually. Neither the interpreter nor the interpreted can be removed from the external world which constitutes and adds meaning to it. Gadamer argues, "...is not a work of art the bearer of a meaningful life-function within a cultic or social context? And is it not within its context alone that it receives its full determination of meaning?" (Gadamer 1).

We must think of art as a text, and if we do, it naturally requires interpretation—"Art demands interpretation because of its inexhaustible ambiguity. It cannot be satisfactorily translated in terms of conceptual knowledge" (Gadamer 69). If we believe Gadamer's argument that anything which holds the potential for multiple meanings permits interpretation, it is logical to conclude, then, that every text necessitates interpretation. Inherent in our definition of interpretation is that there must be multiple possibilities, multiple answers. This is why the translator's name is always mentioned in the edition of a book; who translated the book, matters.

There is also not only one correct, or true interpretation of art. If the nature of interpretation is tied to emotionality and emotions are inherently subjective, interpretation must be as well. It is also the very nature of emotions to change our outlook, our reading. If emotions constitute who we are, it is true that who we are is always changing and thus our interpretation always remains open – "It is important to note that all interpretation points in a direction rather than to some final endpoint, in the sense that it points toward an open realm that can be filled in a variety of ways" (Gadamer 68). This, at face value, sounds quite hopeful. If we think of the interpretation of art in this way, one which is individual and has no necessary "correct" answer, it may allow for the accessibility of the museum space in general. However, acknowledging that the interpretation of art necessitates an interaction with the affective leaves us in a state of vulnerability. We are not trained to think about emotions in this way, nor value them as viable

judgments upon which to initiate discourse with others. In the following section, I explore this specific vulnerability in the museum space.

Uneasiness in the Museum Space

During my four years of working at the gallery on campus, I have spent many hours contemplating how to get more people to enter our room in the campus center. The gallery features, not only the occasional student and professor exhibit, but also works from artists around the country. We have held exhibits about rethinking capital punishment, Native American artwork, and the value of performance and reenactment. In addition, this gallery space is completely free to enter and attend, quite an anomaly in the United States art world. And yet, on good days we get five guests to enter the space. Many days our visitor logs remain blank.

During my time here, we have boosted the gallery's social media, increased postering, and continue to offer free food at openings, which any person who works at a college knows is the best way to attract students to an event. While trying to eliminate as many barriers as possible—thinking of making the gallery a more inviting space by propping the door open or even playing music through the desktop speakers—the response I am still unable to combat is “the gallery is not for me.” I get frustrated by this answer, in the same way I feel frustrated when people say “I can't cook.” What do responses like this mean? Beyond the simple characterization of the effects capitalism has on barriers to entry, I have spent time thinking about the other nuances within this response. Where do these notions of inadequacy or perhaps even inherent lack of ability come from?

People are not hesitant to enter movie theaters or concert venues in the same way. I have attended concerts for bands I've never heard of and movies where I have no idea where the plot

is headed or where the cast is from. What makes the museum space so different from these other venues which are also purely dedicated to the enjoyment of art?

We gravitate towards stories. It is perhaps why we feel more comfortable in a movie theater or even looking at a photograph with human subjects over visiting a gallery of still life paintings. It is in these stories, and the reproduction of them, that we find a sense of home. This process is perhaps easier done linguistically rather than through images—“when we grow up in a language, the world is brought close to us and comes to acquire a certain stability” (Gadamer 114). The mark of fluency can sometimes be determined by whether you can tell if a word sounds out of place or grammar rules are ingrained even if you can not reiterate what they are. For native language speakers, it is often easy to spot when someone is learning your language for the first time. They might place adjectives in the incorrect order or use words that are not quite right but you can't really pinpoint why. These are not necessarily rules you were taught or had to memorize in the same way that you might have to when learning a foreign language. You know if something is correct simply by the way it feels and sounds. For a similar reason, we seem to be much more alienated from art, created in a language which is unfamiliar to us, than movies or songs which have clearer storylines embedded in them. By polarizing the rational from the emotional, we have isolated the museum space for those with certain knowledge and capabilities and have permitted movies and music to be personal and emotional.

To the people who believe that “galleries are not for them,” I want to reply, why not? There is not a certain level of understanding or prerequisite knowledge needed to simply enter a space and walk around. I am not, and do not claim to be an expert in art by any sense of the word. I am neither a history of arts nor a fine arts major. I am not very naturally talented in either

field—they are simply areas that peak my interest, spaces which bring me joy even in the discomfort of the lack of understanding.

In spaces such as the museum, it seems we are always in fear of being placed under examination—worried about being held accountable or called out for a supposed lack of knowledge. The wall texts seem to perform a similar role. They serve as little quizzes and fragments of information, telling the viewer – this is what you ought to see in this piece. When my classmates and I stared at our blank canvases in fear, my favorite highschool art teacher would always say painting is simply making marks on the page. That’s all it is. Making marks. Similarly, I think of cooking as a form of making art. I think by removing art (and cooking) from such a high pedestal, by no longer thinking that only certain people can be artists and chefs, I think my experience of art has made a similar movement. The formal world of art does not cease to be for me simply because I will not, and do not claim to, understand as much as an art critic or art historian.

Gadamer writes an essay on “the speechless image” in which he explains that when we describe ourselves as speechless, we are actually saying that we are feeling too much. When we are at a loss for words, the emotions we are feeling are so intense they are simply indescribable. It is compelling to think of art in the same way. Art, without the accompaniment of natural language, is essentially speechless and perhaps leaves us speechless too. There is something about the viewing and interpretation of art which is pre-linguistic, as Ahmed claims emotions are as well. However, if we separate ourselves from the dichotomies of art and language and emotion and rationality, I am not sure if we can hold this premise to be true. It is no longer possible for the affect to remain prelinguistic if art, language, emotion, and rationality are

ultimately supplementary and interlaced with each other. With this understanding, perhaps we can become slightly more content with existing in the uneasiness that a museum space brings.

Conclusion – Existing in the Uneasiness

I do wonder if museums have value at all? If all meaning of art is relational, isn't it more "real" to look at art in other spaces, "more natural" spaces? Do museums have value apart from creating a physical divide between the possessions and education of the elite bourgeoisie and the proletariat? In the world we live in, I like to believe that when one goes to a museum one takes time out of their likely busy day and enters with the intention of looking at art. Taking time away from being "productive" and instead spending time with things others have created and thought about, is meaningful in its own right. Similar to how watching a movie in a theater is different from watching on a laptop from the comfort of your bedroom and a concert is certainly not the same as AirPods blasting your favorite while at the gym, museums are also valuable in this way. This is not to privilege one experience of art over others. Just because we have to pay money to attend the local theater, this does not make the experience "more pure" than binging on Netflix. It is simply different, and undoubtedly impacts the phenomenological and affective experience as well.

We are able to navigate spaces of art in more meaningful ways if we do not pick one path—emotion or logic—when interpreting art. The process is endlessly revisable and remains open to new interpretations and contemplation. By thinking of natural language and art as well as emotion and rationality as supplements to each other, rather than opposites or threats, we can navigate spaces of art and science in more human ways with slightly less fear of violating the

boundaries of a presupposed elite space. While we may never completely rid ourselves of the uneasy feeling, perhaps we can think of that emotion as purposeful in the grander experience.

High art and the types of work we generally see in museums, have the same connotation around them as the discipline of philosophy. They are both seen as inaccessible, only produced by and for people who sit in ivory towers surrounded by their other intellectual friends who have enough socioeconomic privilege to not do anything else. I love philosophy, not for its sometimes incomprehensible texts or so other people think I'm smart (and even this is not usually the case) but because I love that there is no right answer. The lack of a necessary truth allows for the generation and proliferation of beautiful conversations with people who have experiences and ideas they care about. I have appreciated the process of uncovering what I wanted to talk about in this thesis because I love that everyone I have talked to, whether they enjoy philosophy or absolutely abhor it, have something to say. While I am unable to cite them all directly, everyone I have mentioned in this thesis has had an impact on what I have written here.

These conversations are, I believe, the way out of the uneasiness illuminated in these pages. The produced vulnerability from emphasizing the affect in public interpretational processes can perhaps be alleviated in connecting with others—through which we realize that while our affective experiences are individual, we do not and need not experience them alone. By accentuating conversation with others, we develop a philosophical, questioning disposition. This opening does not undo knowledge, per say, but rather changes our relationship to knowledge altogether. We are no longer concerned with the verity of facts but rather are open to constantly changing meanings, connotations, and perceptions. As subjects, we are able to handle potential destabilization in a constructive and conducive manner. It also leaves us with more compassion for one another.

As we have examined in the previous sections, the interpretation of art is dynamic and subjective. It is meaningful in discursive spaces and impacted by our emotions and past experiences. We are also, thus, impacted by the art we interpret. We are not static beings. We can not claim to be. And thus our work can not be perfect nor complete. This thesis is a part of my process of coming to terms with that understanding. I think what artists, and I, in this process, must come to terms with, is that it is possible for a creation to gain praise from others and yet remain unsatisfactory for the creator. Instead of this reality being disheartening or hopeless, I am choosing for it to be liberating. The process never has to be over—the thought can continue to be revised, questions can be restated, and arguments can be modified and restructured.

As I am writing this, I am terrified of the product I am creating. This blend of deeply personal prose weaved in with the criticism of texts of “real” philosophers remains uncomfortable. But I suppose, if my argument remains—that we ought not to polarize the emotional with the rational and the intelligible, I can not prevent myself from writing in this way; I must write and exist in this uneasiness.

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