

I can't imagine doing a kind of social history that doesn't involve periodic moments of very intense looking—describing everything that can be seen, and leaving nothing out, as far as your vision can tell. Otherwise, you haven't dealt with the thing, you've only dealt with the parts that accord with the history you've come to affirm.

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## Darby English

**What would you point to as an early important aesthetic experience?**

When I was a child, we went to The Cleveland Museum of Art. My favorite experiences were of strolling through those galleries with parents who enjoyed this very much. They weren't necessarily always equipped to provide detailed information about the art we were looking at, but they were only too happy to indulge their only child in this way. At a certain point, it must have been clear that I was the person who needed this experience the most, but I was never made to feel as though my interest was a burden to them. I don't recall having a lot to say about it—ever since I could talk I have had speech impediments, and this predisposed me to keep words to myself—but I loved looking, in a deep and abiding way. I guess I looked really hard; I certainly wanted to look often. My first real loves were Dutch landscape paintings by Ruisdael and Van Goyen, which I revisited almost on a pilgrimage basis. I was mainly looking at paintings; it took me the longest time to learn how to see sculpture of any kind. The *Portrait of Tieleman Roosterman* [1634], by Frans Hals—I saw it again recently, and it's still to me as completely fixating as ever. Looking back, I feel that a painting like that appeared to me as something like *mitigated truth*.

**What do you mean by that?**

The works that first taught me that art is a special and crucial part of the real world were realistic paintings—they promoted the realness of depicted figures and spaces while giving, and maybe even flaunting, evidence of an artist's intervention, evidence of an individual person-

ality's interpretation of . . . *whatever*. That truth could be sensed and not merely stated or displayed was already a considerable development upon everyday understandings of truth, in my world. Now I could think about truth reconciled with felicity; reconciled with opinion; reconciled with differentness. That frees you up in your relationship to truth in the unreflective, common sense. That's important when you're different, when all the evidence you have suggests that one's sense of things isn't so common.

Looking back, I think that whatever that sense was—a confirmation of sensibility or something—it's one of the most crucial insights I've ever received. That truth wasn't one thing, there wasn't a one truth, even about the way the land and the sky outside look, or the way that guy sitting over there looks. There's something absolutely discrete about him, but you and I will find different things to be interested in when looking at him, when treating him as though he were merely a view. Something about the proliferation of mitigated truths in a museum, for me, confirms one's right to take a different kind of interest in the things and beings of the world, as long as one sees what, in them, is singular and discrete and not subject to alteration under the pressure of a view. This is a right that needs to be protected fiercely. Art may protect that right more fiercely than any other institution in the culture. Anyway, for me, art has something to do with the individual's right to *differ*. I feel very lucky to have lived a life that affirmed this early on.

It wasn't just painting specific. Teachers affirmed this. At some point in high school, I turned in a paper on Joseph Conrad in which I described a scene that seemed to me green by calling it "verdant." No big deal, just a word somewhere in something that I'd written. But the teacher called me aside to thank me for using such a beautiful word; probably part of the thanks related to the correctness of the usage, too. I didn't then and don't now know what to make of this. It wasn't the "day I became a writer"—actually, it increased my anxiety about writing, because I then wanted to always produce papers that moved her in that way. But something happened.

### Were you writing outside of assignments—poems or stories?

Yes. There was a literary magazine at my school. I contributed poems, which were terrible. I think I even knew then that they were terrible. I got one or two published. The faculty advisor took me to be responsible enough to be an editor. My best friend and I ended up coediting the literary magazine for a year or two. So now we were arbiters of literary taste in our little microculture. We'd have meetings to review submissions, and we took this very seriously. There was also a little popularity nonsense going on, like, *There's no way we're going to print anything by that asshole*. We were cultivating a sense—our own respective senses—of what "good taste" meant in English-language writing. But we were also perpetrating our taste. That became uncomfortable after a period of time, and I resigned before my senior year. I didn't want to be outside other people's use of language, judging it up or down. At that point, I started listening to a lot of music, mainly for lyrics at the time, because I had quit all my instruments except for one. And I read a lot of "real" writing, mostly nonfiction. From my time at the literary magazine, I learned something about myself that has remained true: I dislike deciding things for other people. On the one hand, to me that's a scary kind of power, rarely used for good; on the other, it's so completely enchanting to me to watch how people who are not me make choices in navigating the landscapes we share—landscapes such as a language, or a neighborhood, or a work of art. I love a minor difference.

### What was particularly important to you at that time?

At that point, I was reading a lot of art criticism.

### In high school?

Yes. I got a copy of Peter Schjeldahl's *The Hydrogen Jukebox* [1991]—amazing to me because it was this sparsely illustrated thing full of freely felt, deliberate, and forcefully put words about art. It took me forever to reconcile the essays' claims with the art they're ostensibly about, because this writing was so autonomous. A very interesting encounter for a child to have with subject-driven language; something for me to think about, maybe, in relation to my present-day fear of

autonomous art writing. I also read George Kubler's translation of Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* [1942] at that time. I was totally mystified and in love, but probably had no idea what I was reading. I did understand the attempt, however, to describe the problem of verbalizing the ineffable in concrete things. It's a perennial problem, too. Didn't know that then, either.

**The thing about *Hydrogen Jukebox* is that Peter is one of our greatest writers on painting. His Manet essay is a way of narrating the experience of painting as an intersubjective experience, through close attention to form—that seems close to what you're doing in your newest book, *To Describe a Life*.**

That essay was very important to me, along his essays on Chardin and Morandi, which do the same thing. Looking back—*What was I getting from Peter Schjeldahl's essays?* The same thing I was getting from James Merrill and James Baldwin and Ellison's nonfiction at the same time—the sense that *it's not about you*. Some art is doing things—things unrelated to its depiction or the criticality of its sheer positioning vis-à-vis a charged site—things that it wants people to know about in detail. In trying to tell them, because the art can't tell them itself, one cannot, I feel, limit the account to descriptions of the art's own means, whatever the fuck those would be. Art exists for the people who will come along and try to come to terms with it, to describe its attempt, and to find a context for this attempt as part of an effort to ascertain its impact on something beyond itself, beyond art. That context in turn belongs to history, which is a complex of contexts, but in the end history is only a perspective. One person's view of what it took to bring now about. I feel like Peter's respect for the art's core modesty about its situation amid all this, about its dependency on attempts made or not made, is exemplary. He's going to tell you what he thinks, but he doesn't start out with that. And he has no time for pathetic, academic hang-ups.

**It's never prescriptive.**

At its best, it's a deeply empathetic project, which has to do with producing a legible and durable record of something that's been fully considered. *I'm not going anywhere until I've seen everything that this thing*

*has to show me*. It's most often a *thing* with Schjeldahl, but of course sometimes one needs to make the same commitment to describe a situation adequately.

In a book like *1971*, when I'm talking about color painting and color sculpture and trying to think about the historiography of color, a similar kind of commitment was required. The book looks closely at writing about color; of course; all that writing is happening in a social context that's structured by "color" in a strong racial sense. I can't imagine doing a kind of social history that doesn't involve periodic moments of very intense looking—describing everything that can be seen and leaving nothing out, as far as your vision can tell. Otherwise, you haven't dealt with the thing, you've only dealt with the parts that accord with the history you've come to affirm—you've come to the object for something, taken only what you needed, and left a great lot behind. My project forbids that kind of selectivity, at least up front. Obviously at other, early stages of research, one must make decisions, and that means making choices from among what's available—not only to see and describe, but also to feel and think. If the work is any good, if it exists for some reason that makes a claim on history, then there'll be a lot. When someone is faced with a lot of something, she has to make choices.

**When you went to college, did you intend to study art history?**

I was surer about studying English and philosophy. I ended up with two majors, trading English for art history. I went to Williams College, which is known for a rigorous and rigorously traditional kind of art history that was cultivated by academic men and museum men. Are you noting the emphasis on *men*? White ones. But I got the solidest of foundations there. I took the survey in the first two semesters of my freshman year—if we ended in the twentieth century, it was probably with the late work of a nineteenth-century painter. There was no modernism, really—at least not available to the undergraduates. I was required to buy a copy of Steinberg's *Other Criteria* [1972], *thank God*, but I can't recall reading it in a classroom setting, the sensibility of which almost every page of those essays would gravely offend. And

there was utterly no thought of contemporary art in the official art historical narrative. No courses on contemporary art until the fall of my last year: one was taught by a brilliant painter, Mike Glier, who was himself in the throes of postmodernist art theory at the time; the other was for graduate students and cotaught by Linda and Hartley Shearer. So it was late in school, during that first term of the last year, that I caught a glimpse of an art history that occupied a full-bodied and relatively unanxious relationship to the present. Following the surveys, I took memorable courses in the art of the Dutch Golden Age, history of architecture, all the French painting from Robert to David and his followers—which is so little art, when you think of it—and other European painting. Again, a solid training not much modified from the canon of objects and writings established during the century of the founding of the discipline. Things were similarly conservative methodologically, with the exemption of some discourse theory, some film theory, and the core works of English-language feminist art history. Linda Nochlin was an early hero. I needed reading and courses well beyond art history in order to learn how to think about language, race, class, and sexuality. The difference between art criticism, which I do not do or even value particularly highly, and art history, which I regard as a staple of cultural history and try assiduously to practice well—this difference was not taught. Looking back, that strikes me as odd.

Two big interventions or so occurred in my sophomore and junior year. The first one was Abigail Solomon-Godeau coming from Santa Barbara to teach a course in the graduate program that some undergrads such as myself were permitted to take. She put art history in a historical perspective, not only alongside other moments in its own disciplinary life, but alongside other social practices. And she was just fucking brilliant. I learned modernism from someone who was hard at work dimensionalizing it. Hers was a pretty vigorously anti-institutional modernism, and there was this awareness that art history was an institution, one defined and refined and promulgated through procedures like majoring in it, and assimilating masters and master narratives—continually reinstituting instituted knowledge.

And there was a concomitant awareness that there had to be other ways of caring deeply how art has been made, presented, and understood through time. Abigail never attacked our curriculum outright, but from the reading and the learning she directed, it was clear that that curriculum was an institution inviting critique. Another kind of white cube, if you want. That was massively helpful, because I hadn't until then the language to narrate my complaint about the curriculum. By "complaint," I probably mean all the standard young skeptic questions, like, *What about me? What about now? What about all the ways of power? What about the stuff that so much of this writing elides or mitigates in advance?* And I was both nervous about and discouraged from bringing in language from philosophy and political theory, where I was spending all my spare time.

This was the mid-1990s. Disciplines were splitting and recombining. A good number were being straight-up invented. Until this two-part moment, I knew this, but couldn't reconcile it with my greatest academic love, and let me tell you—that was hard. So, the second big thing was Debra Bricker Balken, an independent scholar based in Cambridge, coming to teach a course on museology during Winter Study of my junior year. In that class I read Douglas Crimp's *On the Museum's Ruins* [1993], which was more or less hot off the presses. I read it really fast and it blew my brain apart, and I turned to Douglas's *AIDS Demo Graphics* [1990] next. These books look differently at institutionalized art politics and political practices involving art; they develop a language of critique for the forms that constitute art as well as those that constrain it. The museum book was assigned very early in the course, but I stayed with it, as it stayed with me. The feeling was somehow, *This is what I've needed all this time*. Queer life on that campus was *very good* in those years—*God, was it good*—and I was reading queer theory in political theory courses, but didn't know how to adapt it to anything. Douglas's work showed me how. Douglas's AIDS work is largely anticipated in the museum book, but that book hit me at the same time that the difference between being gay and being queer snapped into view. Anyway, it made it possible for me at last to imagine

an art-oriented intellectual practice that was fully open to what I needed from political theory, and that militated against the closures I experienced in art history. That was when I decided to apply to the University of Rochester to work with Douglas. It's the only thing that I *knew* I wanted to try next. Of the postcollege options I was qualified to pursue, only that one felt urgent. I had something to figure out. I'm still figuring it out, and it's every bit as thrilling now as it was then.

A funny thing happened when I first got to Rochester, cat and all. In my first academic meeting with Douglas, naturally he wanted to know what I was thinking about working on. I'm like, *Museums, duh! That's our thing, right?* And the first words out of his mouth, which he said with a kind of confused sweetness, were, *Darby, you know, I don't think about museums anymore.* Flat out. If he said a thing about what he *did* think about, I don't remember it. All I knew was that my Ruby and I lived in Rochester now, so that I could think about museums with Douglas Crimp, who himself doesn't think about museums anymore. Somehow I was able not to worry too much about that. I mean, there we were.

Not long after that, I needed a subject for a paper I had to write in one of the two classes I was taking with Douglas that semester. I realized I was still thinking about a Glenn Ligon installation I'd seen at the Williams College Museum of Art as a college kid. The total exhibition was titled *Glenn Ligon: To Disembark* [1993]—it comprised the wanted ads from Glenn's *Runaways* [1993] series, for which his friends provided him with descriptions of Glenn, the sort of thing they'd say in a "missing person" report; it had the music-box shipping crates, which reminded you first of Judd and then of Henry "Box" Brown, a slave who was shipped to freedom in crates of similar proportion and construction. If you didn't already know about Brown, which I did not, a label nearby schooled you. Ligon's first text paintings made directly on the wall were also in that show. I think it was one with a Zora Neale Hurston text, either *Untitled (I Remember the Very Day That I Became Colored)* [1990] or *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* [1990]—one of those two. Oilstick applied directly to plain white gallery walls, Glenn's selection and Glenn's hand revivifying

Hurston as a kind of elevated graffiti. And the whole complex of art objects was a whole. I was like, *What the fuck?* This show had haunted me in the quietest way. Looking back, I think it was the vividness of the intersections in the work—past with present, minimal art with lumber, freedom with unfreedom, literary aesthetics with visual aesthetics of low and high kinds . . . And it was extra great in a way because I had no discourse explaining it to me. It just happened—again and again, because I returned a lot—and then sank in. Three whole years passed before I tried formulating a single sentence about it. Maybe we should all have to wait that long between having an experience and tap-tap-typing out random junk about it. Not because what I eventually wrote was so great, but because during this gestation or whatever, the work and the experience had grown into this incredibly thick, rich, personal and intellectual resource that was my own.

Anyway, this exhibition had really nailed me at Williams, but I never had any place to think about it, since the curriculum allocated such a tiny space for contemporary art. So I decided to write my first seminar paper on Ligon's work. Douglas said, *That's good. I know Glenn*—who kindly got his gallery to send me all of the slides, all of the press, and not only the citations for the entire bibliography, but the texts and books, as well. There weren't tons then, so in a box I could carry home I got the whole extant Glenn Ligon research archive. Then I read what passed for a literature about Ligon's practice, and I was flabbergasted by the lack of attention to form in virtually all of it. *Flabbergasted.*

My primary experience with this work had been totally form based—a phenomenally rich, extended intensity. None of what I myself felt the work to be, or do, or mean was reflected in any of the writing. Every critic or writer who encountered it seemed to take it as an opportunity to reflect on the demographics of the art world, or spout random givens about blackness, maleness, gayness, or whatever. Generalizations about abstractions—*Great.* Seriously: generalization after generalization, barely one of them inflected by the texture or character of the various works under discussion. In a way, dealing with this has been my problem ever since—pointing it out, correcting

for it, theorizing preventative measures we might take, as best as one writing person can do. At this point, I should probably confess that it's a revisionist project—revising racist arts-and-culture writing by black people as much as revising racist arts-and-culture writing by nonblack people. And, to be clear, what's racist about it is its perpetuation of the racist norms that condone generalization and dismissal through disattention to specificity, alterity, variance, and just plain change.

**Your book *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* is a revisionist reengagement with late modernist color painting and sculpture, which was off-limits in art history for a long time because of its associations with Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. But a critique of the Black Arts Movement also drives the book. I would love to open that up a little bit. How did you first encounter the rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement that you felt the need to react to it so strongly?**

The first encounter? I was an upper-middle-class black kid in rural suburban Cleveland—which was *not really a thing* when I was a kid in the late seventies and eighties. I was just going along and doing my music lessons, doing school, hanging out with friends—all of whom are white. There's music everywhere in your life—in the car, in the bathroom, in the living room, even in the garage—some of it's black and some of it's not. You just like it or you don't. The people who help your family to constitute a neighborhood are all white people; you see nothing of conflict between your parents and these people. You have your crushes and your nemeses, all of whom are white. Then there's some party, staged by someone's parents right around the time everyone is getting hormonal. I'm at this party, and at some point I'm in a gaggle of boys, and this kid Brian and I realize that we want to touch the body of the same girl, who is white. And it turns out that Brian has a certain right-of-way in that situation. I didn't know this until I acted, or spoke as though I were about to act, on my own interest in the girl in question. That's when Brian let me know he had right-of-way. I responded by pushing him down a short flight of stairs and running away from the fight that surely would have ensued if I hadn't run. So, like Hurston in that line that Ligon appropriated for a painting, I remember the very

day that I became colored. The day I was made to realize that there was something about the apparently minor differences between him and her and me that wasn't minor at all. At least not on that occasion.

Well, that's all very abstract. I came to the language of black essentialism around the same time, through some school exercises. It either was clear or was made clear that it was inviting me to join it, to enter into its fold. By then I was committed to the fantasy that I don't color my tastes, because good and bad things weren't colored accordingly in the world where I formed. Things are *mixed* there. I was formed in a mixed and overwhelmingly peaceful place. We did everything that interested us until our interest changed direction, and then we did something else. For that reason mainly, I like that which keeps *open* the question of cultural location.

The first time I encountered strong black cultural formation—as a thing that I was expected to want to be a part of, to feel at home in—was high school. There was a Black Student Union. Later, my college would have its own version. My relation to both was fraught. Already the “union” tells you a little about the historical pedigree—this is a vestige of the systematic collectivization of black students in a situation where each person would otherwise be left to her own devices, which was a very dangerous situation in the sixties and seventies. You had to have your *people*.

Everybody with a difference from the norm, wherever they happen to be, deals with this. Like, *Are you a joiner or not? What are going to be the terms for joining or choosing to remain perpetually in a negotiated liminality between yourself and the various groups you might join?* Frankly, it's much harder to go on one's own and stay one's own course. But that was my choice, and for that choice I was made to feel uncomfortable by a majority of the other black students at my school.

Then at Williams, the resident advisors in my dormitory, from the very beginning, were both like, *Darby, are you going to go to the BSU orientation for new students?* Not particularly flatly, I said no, but I didn't give a reason. I didn't even go to see. I think because I didn't want to be in a formation. My luck so far in life had been such that,

socially speaking, I could go where I wanted to go and work my way into whatever scene. The way my parents would say it, when I walked into a room, I saw everyone as a potential friend. Not that I'm super extroverted or outgoing; I just am comfortable with people as they are in the world as it is. Doubtless this bears some ultimate relation to the way I myself want to be treated. I've been lucky to experience less targeted racial violence than a lot of people in my social category.

So my first encounters weren't with black power ideas of an original vintage, but they were with the contemporary vestiges of that. The first time I studied it was when I was at Williams taking a comparative religion course with a lesbian theologian, Reverend Dr. Thandeka, who taught *Eve and the Snake*—a famously important and very difficult course. We read feminist comparative religious theory, like Gerda Lerner. We read Audre Lorde—I read “Uses of the Erotic” [1978] for the first of what must now be a couple hundred times. That class changed me as a person in the same way that *On the Museum's Ruins* had changed me as a baby art historian. I realized that black feminism, and a queer black feminism especially, was closer to my heart and experience than anything else I'd ever read about identity of any kind. I would need a lot of time to figure out what was going on in that connection. I think now that it may have had to do with the distance I felt, both historically and experientially, from black American male certainties about the world into which we're born, certainties about how the world feels about us, certainties about how we ought to orient ourselves in response to it. I just don't know all that stuff; or, rather, what I do know doesn't yield certainties of that kind. It recently became possible for me to say this about a revered colleague and friend, Fred Moten: Fred *knows things* about blackness that I just don't know. And I can't write as though I do. And if you're going to try to make me feel bad about that, then that's on you, but know this: it isn't going to work.

**It is fascinating to contrast your work and early formation with Fred Moten's deep connection with the Black Arts Movement through the work of Amiri Baraka.**

I want to broaden it beyond Fred. He's by no means the only

practitioner who can be associated with such a starting point. He's the most nuanced and rigorous of those thinkers, in my opinion, but he's not alone. I'm so grateful to be in dialogue with him, strained and minimal as it is. I can't imagine better luck as a scholar than to be in dialogue with one of the smartest people in the world about the stuff you, too, are trying to think about as hard as you can. He's willing to disagree. He's willing to tell me, word for word, what he doesn't buy about my arguments. He can't get on board with a lot of things that I think and do and try, but he's respectful in a way that stands out. That's Fred's humanism and *his humanity*. They combine into something fierce, and fiercely necessary. Whereas I'm not convinced that Baraka can be described the same way.

**I love hearing that, because I feel like people won't disagree like that about art right now. If there are fights, it's not about art—it's about a kind of righteous indignation around political issues in proximity to art, but it's not about the art itself.**

I have a similarly strong response to what feels like an absence of spirited debate about art, which produces that nauseating ease with which folks will shame you for disliking something that's on trend in whatever way. I had a moment of release from this just yesterday, but it was quickly followed by another very “now” frustration, which is born of people denying that something is interesting because they don't want to look at it—or, better, be seen by it. I'd been to Gladstone Gallery to see a Thomas Hirschhorn show, *De-Pixelation* [2017–2018]. Just as I started looking at the things right in front of me, my “more-of-the-same” eyes flashed clear. Then it was different, a different Hirschhorn. He's thinking of something else, in a new mode, on a different scale, with a different language. It wasn't an environment of any kind. There's something gravely serious about the approach that he's taken, both to making the things that are on view and making them available to viewers. And there's a very simple concept at the heart of it, which is de-pixelation—which takes the stuff that's pixelated in our news images, like the horrors of war, and de-pixelates it so that we can deal precisely with what is horrible about the horrors ostensibly

“depicted” in what actually are redacted photographs and video feeds. He’s pointing to a core conflict in our relation to the image culture we inhabit: we condone its mitigation of the very truths we use it to document.

After Hirschhorn and a good deal else, I was having drinks with friends, all of whom had seen the Gladstone show, hated it, decided it had no complexity. Turns out no one had looked at anything. They just didn’t look at it. Technically, we were talking about the art in the show, only all of it was being seen through a scrim comprising everything they already knew about Thomas Hirschhorn before arriving. Somehow, all of it was clear even to shut eyes: what he was up to, what he had to tell us, how the telling went, how to assimilate it post-encounter. On one level, I *get* it: there’s too much art that’s telling us things about ourselves. I have my own problem with that disposition toward the viewer. But I like art more than I like avoiding conflicts as expertly as possible—and I *really* like avoiding conflict! Anyway, it was a disappointing conversation, but the company was unbeatable. What are you gonna do?

The way that I engage with a lot of art writing is as the embodiment of a worldview, almost as a form of fiction—the world the writer would like to inhabit. From that perspective, thinking about *1971*, I see that as showing the kind of attention and consideration I would like to exist in the world. The reason you can write that way in *1971* is that a color-oriented art asserts an overwhelmingly formal experience, which has to be attended to in a particularly intense way. That is not the way that art is written about now, or, in many cases, asks to be looked at.

I don’t think art has to—wow, this is a much larger claim than I expected to hear myself making—but, I don’t think art has to make the plea for attention on its own. That color-driven art *seized* attention. Those works entail a quantum of concentration and demand a quantum of concentrated focus. One had to accept the terms of an immersive proposal—*This work proposes an immersion, are you up to it?* One had a choice to make, and it was hoped that one would choose immersion. But I also feel that there’s an obligation to attend even where attention

isn’t being seized, even in the absence of that proposal. I think it’s what we’re supposed to do anyway. Art wants attention, and I want to provide it with a supportive environment.

Well, that is borne out most beautifully in *To Describe a Life*, which I think is a really stunning work of art writing. Part of what’s so brilliant is that you’re lavishing a kind of close formal reading on objects that don’t even seem to ask for it.

Or *warrant* it?

Or seem to warrant it. There are moments when you’re gearing up to doing a close formal reading of Pope.L’s *Skin Set Drawings* [1997–ongoing], where I was like, *Really? This is what we’re doing?* But I went with it, and suddenly you get to the point where—*It’s paying off!* It seemed like that was your intention: *I’m going to bring to bear a level of attention on these things that don’t even seem like they deserve it.* That somehow seems like an ethical or political move.

It is. They’re not arbitrarily chosen. They’re chosen because I do think that, despite perhaps *seeming* unlikely to withstand that kind of long and lavish attention, each work under consideration has worthwhile things to say to us about being in this world, right now.

They have things to say to *you*.

That’s a very helpful corrective. They have things to say to *me* about how I ought to think—not *what*, but about *how* I ought to try and think, about what is happening in the world right now, which is an epidemic of disregard for specific human vitalities. I don’t think the art has to formulate a specific demand for us to behave as though there is one to respond to, or honor. I don’t think one needs to be doing journalistic biography of dead people to talk about mass execution, to talk about what’s at stake in the visualization of real lives that matter, that can continue to matter even after they’re ended. The visuality itself of abruptly ended life is also extremely complex, important to be able to think about now, and in this I am recalled to Hirschhorn, and specifically to the import, for his latest project, of recentness. Fresh death. Though it’s terribly hard to remember, the individual people that we lose are never fully gone. Memory work bears them passage

into what is a future for them and a perpetual present for us. Maybe in *To Describe a Life* I am trying to think about how to suggest that the relative endurance of works of art are powered by a similar sort of *durability*—they’re not monumental, they’re not made of permanent materials, they’re not strident in their disposition, but they have, or want, *staying power*. Art power evolves with culture change. So maybe what has staying power are these objects’ implications. I think their invitations—the kind of looking and thinking that they invite us to do—are important factors to attend to right now.

The introduction includes an explication of *Tipping Point* [2016], Zoe Leonard’s sculpture made of a stack of fifty-three copies of James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* [1963]; it’s one of the finest pieces of art writing of this century. Just so *fine*. Partly I think that because I hated those book stacks.

A lot of people do.

What it made me realize was not only that I had not really looked at them or thought about them, but even if I had, I don’t think I would have come up with the same reading that you did, which was so *deeply felt*. It was an affirmation of what writing about art can do, which is model the experience of one consciousness engaging with an object as an embodiment of multiple other consciousnesses—sorting that through. You bring into that not only Zoe Leonard and James Baldwin, but all fifty-three people who owned those books before Leonard acquired them. It really captured something profound about art. I’m not even sure if the context exists in the present art world to receive what you’re doing in *To Describe a Life*.

This is the most amazing thing I can hear, that somewhere on the page was evidenced the work I attempted to do as a conscious, reflective, curious looker, to figure something out about this sculpture, about how it came to have huge significance for me. I decided a long time ago that I write for the future. All I want is for people down the line to know that someone took this very seriously.

For instance, I want for people to know that someone was looking at Glenn Ligon’s first text paintings and *not* deciding that, say, the affinity

with Jasper Johns was perfunctory. When I was reading all the writing on Ligon up to December 1996, most of it was capsule reviews. Richard Meyer’s catalogue essay for the show at the ICA Philadelphia was the only scholarly text. And it was serious: Richard did his homework, he looked long and hard. But his essay strung all the work together in a way that gave rise to some suspicion on my part. I wondered, *Is it really so much of a thing, all these different things Ligon has done? What about the mechanics of the appropriations all over the practice?* Richard’s and my difference on this score came down to method. In figuring out precisely how Richard’s piece frustrated me, I learned what I now know about the lack of integrity in what we sometimes call an oeuvre. Farewell to the oeuvre! But like I said, that was method.

Elsewhere in the first wave of Ligon literature, what made the most indelible impression was the sheer racism of a review by Michael Kimmelman of a show including some of Ligon’s early text paintings. Kimmelman writes something like, *There was this and this and a text painting by a young black artist called Glenn Ligon that suggests the unlikely source of Jasper Johns*. Of course, there’s nothing “unlikely” about Jasper Johns having been a source for Ligon. On a really real level, all I’m trying to do in what I’ve done on Glenn’s work is to say to some student in the future, *Okay, you’ve seen one version of this art’s genealogy, wherein black artists don’t warrant comparison to white artists, because how could a black one even know about a white one? Here’s an alternative*.

I mean, to be responding to what you were saying when you said, *I don’t think there’s a reader in the art culture of now for this*—that’s fine. I wish there were. It would be nice to encounter kindred spirits more often. I’ve found that that’s not reasonable to expect from art readers right now. They’re after something else, something that’s not what I do.

I would love to know more about what brought you to use Simone Weil’s *The Iliad, or, The Poem of Force* [1939] in your essay on Kerry James Marshall’s painting *Untitled (Policeman)* [2015].

Weil was introduced to me in a seminar on French critical theory that I took in graduate school with the critical theorist Tom DiPiero. I peeked at the essay on the *Iliad* then and maybe didn’t really find what

I was looking for, whatever that was. But I kept it close, all of the Weil, because it's at once very weird and powerfully true. For the longest time, whenever there was a new pile, I would pull it out and stick it on top. For years and years, I was *about* to read all of the Weil. Jacqueline Rose's collection *The Last Resistance* [2007] has an essay on Simone Weil written just as a sort of a tribute. I'm greatly indebted to Rose's thought and writing—her commitments to thinking about the creative enterprise that sets itself up *in between* conflicting entities, and her commitment to advocating for artists—mainly writers—who create in impossible situations. And she understands that, underneath it all, Freud was one of the finest prose stylists of the last century. Jackie's whole project is a model for me. I try to think of my commitments as being to people with a similar positionality, like being black in the wrong way, or being black at the wrong time, or being black at the wrong place. Often these become impossible situations, if they don't start out that way. Not as much gunfire as in the places that hold Rose's gaze in those essays, but other violent deployments of force are very much the norm.

Anyway, I saw Kerry's painting unfinished, and I left the studio thinking he was making a takedown of the police. All I really knew was that he was making a painting of a cop and that I still despise the cops. For what it's worth, the cops have given me a lot of good reasons to despise them. I was like, *Can I come back when it's finished?* He called me to come see it the morning it was shipping out to Miami for an art fair. I walked into the studio and saw immediately that he hadn't been doing what I wanted him to be doing. I felt some resentment. I felt the force of my own need for this painting to have been some kind of equal but opposite strike against the police. It's utterly ambivalent—*utterly ambivalent*. Really unshakably so. At some nearby moment, I recalled Weil's words about the figure she describes as the man of force and the recipient of his force. On her account, force turns both into stone; there's no breaking down the recalcitrance they achieve in the face of one another. It must be that I felt the force in me was equivalent to the one that I projectively attributed to the police, and I *felt* it in a way that I had never felt it before—walking into Kerry's studio and encounter-

ing an ambivalent image of the police. I felt myself standing squarely in front of the painting, trying to change it around into what I needed. And it wasn't complying. I don't even know how to express how grateful I am for that, now that I've taken a period of time to look at it and learn from it. I live for that.

I tend to be wrong about a great deal of what I think I know. Kerry's painting doesn't *know* things about blackness and policing. It doesn't *know* things about race and policing that everyone in the culture knows to a certain degree. I'm glad there's finally a monument to not knowing some of that stuff—a nonmonumental monument for not knowing. The approach that the painting takes to our knowingness and us is oblique: we're witnesses to this clenched scene, we're not the addressee. And I just love Weil's words, and found them adequate to this conflict, her conviction that, when force is on the move, master and slave both turn to stone. The violence and the mentality that that arrangement adopts, it's all-pervading—but at a certain level of ontological interrelation, there is no power difference. That's more than a little bit fucked up, but it's also powerfully true.

**And like many things in Weil, it's figured as strangely impersonal. She's someone I've been reading over and over since I was, like, nineteen years old, but lately she's felt like oxygen. There's a line in *Gravity and Grace* [1947] where she says, "Every being cries out silently to be read differently." I really felt that was the core of your project.**

Differently every time? Differently from—

**Differently from however it's being read.**

Yes, exactly. In other words, every reading produces the fantasy of an alternative reading that competes—for what thing, we cannot say—with the reading one has just performed, with another's reading or one's own reading on a different occasion. In any case, there is the always present conception of the same text perceived from a different point of view. For Weil, and I think for all serious readers, this truth about reading, an inescapable fantasy, serves both as a menace and as a thrill. In this very limited way, works of art differ very little in their effects from texts.

In *To Describe a Life*, you draw an equivalence between the individuality of a subject and the individuality of the work of art.

I suggest one. And it's by that suggestion that the "life" in the title may seem a double entendre. I'm fine with that as a provisional suggestion. The only way it works as a title is by way of the double interpretation—life as we know it and the discrete existences of specific artworks. I guess it shows through that I'm always still puzzling through *The Life of Forms*. Focillon's project in that book has aged extremely well. It may even be more completely of our time than it is of its own, because we have survived the reigns of countless narrow formalisms. The art that no formalism can contain enjoys a greater freedom in the aesthetic and interpretive schemes of the present. There *is* a life in forms. That's just axiomatic for us today.

**You feel it.**

What I have come to love about that book is the number of ways Focillon has to formulate the vitality that he sees and feels in a really astonishing range of objects—spaces, shallow relief, painting qua painting. There's something ecstatic about the methodology. It's deeply queer, his refusal of any available formal disciplinarity.

**There is a footnote in *To Describe a Life* that includes a beautiful little snippet of a Kay Ryan poem. I was interested in your relationship to poetry, and how it figures in your thinking about writing.**

It's simple: I go to poetry in search of an economy that I find it hard to generate on my own. My friend Hamza Walker, who graciously reads a lot of my drafts, says he's always adding water, to dilute them, thin them out, clarify them. I've also recently begun to purge my dependency on adverbial modifiers; they just don't need to be there. I favor short-line poetry, a poetry whose saying achieves palpable substance with as few words as possible. I'm not interested in poetry's metaphors so much, in part because I'm very bad at metaphor—bad at tracking it and bad at doing it. Relatedly, I dislike the distraction of metaphor in writing whose primary aims are description, analysis, and interpretation. I just think it's diversionary. There's no time for that. The poets whose work I need nearby when I am writing, these

poets tend to be practical realists who approach their subjects directly. Books by Ryan and Louise Glück are literally always within a few steps' reach. They think about thinking and look at looking; what keeps them on the move is the dimensionality of the things and beings of the world, which makes a peculiar kind of comfort out of the fact that there is *always* more to think about and to look at. Other constants include Harmony Holiday, Frank O'Hara, Mona Van Duyn, Alice Notley, and Tony Hoagland.

For me, great poetry takes you out of syntax as you know it, shows you what else language can do, takes very seriously what it cannot do. It can be a great help to narrate frustration, so that it's not just debilitating noise. Words can do so much more than we let them do—single words, even. And autonomous images made from words, not to metaphorize, just to describe differently. I have learned *so much* about what I do and how I do it, as someone living an art life, from Kay Ryan. There's a poem called "Least Action" [2003]. It's equally about vision itself, this huge and hugely pertinent subject, and about the nature of any attempt to effect something, which is so micro. It goes:

It is vision  
or the lack  
that brings me  
back to the principle  
of least action,  
by which in one  
branch of rabbinical  
thought the world  
might become the  
Kingdom of Peace not  
through the tumult  
and destruction necessary  
for a New Start, but  
by adjusting little parts  
a little bit—maybe turn

that cup a quarter inch  
 or scoot up that bench.  
 It imagines an  
 incremental resurrection,  
 a radiant body  
 puzzled out through  
 tinkering with the fit  
 of what's available.  
 As though what is is  
 right already but  
 askew. It is tempting  
 for any person who would  
 like to love what she  
 can do.

Just that phrase “tinkering with the fit / of what’s available”—rather than needing always to revolutionize everything at once. Not just least action “versus” maximal action. The poem is pointing to the sometimes shocking effectiveness of the smallest adjustment makeable. I think I come back to that poem when I need to be reminded about what kind of change art can actually make. I do believe in art’s effectiveness. I do believe that it can be actually politically efficacious. But it doesn’t achieve effectiveness or efficaciousness through a cause-and-effect kind of directness. It does not, nor has it ever. Where it concerns things that need changing, art is but a means among other means. Art sends word: *We have a situation*. Word has to reach someone. It must be received and translated up, or over, or out—transformed somehow. Some amount of telephone gaming will be necessary between the creation of a change-oriented work and some change. How much can I really do with this writing? I will do everything that I can do, but that will never be equal to what is needed.

Ryan’s poetry, in particular, is adapted to the conflict between the appetite for change and the world’s recalcitrance. In a poem called “New Rooms” [2012], Ryan talks about how nice it would be if everywhere we

go we could just tack up the rooms we know. Thing is, the windows and doors in the rooms we know won’t sync with the windows and doors in the new rooms where we find ourselves. What do we do? We have again and again to learn new rooms, to leave the old rooms behind. We have to let go. Maybe this pertains to an experiment in the writing I am doing now: giving poetry a place instead of shunting it off-camera. I don’t have a message about the role poetry’s playing, except to say that I am thinking with poems all the time. It’s surprising that I don’t have a poetry book in my pocket this morning, because usually I do. It’s become very crucial, because I have a hard time with “feeling” words.

#### **What do you mean?**

Words for feelings, like names for my feelings. My therapist observed a long time ago that when I talk about pleasure or frustration or excitement or anxiety, my discourse is conspicuously devoid of feeling words. I leap to an intellectual level as quickly as possible. Poetry has been a help in that department. Probably I choose the poetry I choose because much of it proceeds from a patient narration of response, in the real, to stuff that occurs immediately. Occurrences that leave no time for abstracting everything into a nice parcel of intellectualization. I think that what we’ve been talking about, and I think sharing between us, is a conviction that without access to one’s feeling words, very little can be done in art writing that’s actually faithful to what we need to relate.