

July 15, 2015

Hello birds of feather and branch. Great to see you all! Honored to be included in the gatherings!

Here are a few things I've been thinking about [...].

1. The Amateur. On the one hand, we talked somewhat disparagingly [...] about docents and other “teachers.” On the other hand, we reminded ourselves to avoid interpretation/studium – though we typically failed, offering learned bits and pieces – because we're all smart, sensitive, generous, and eager to share. These aren't really two hands or even three, but between them I sense an ambivalence about the amateur. The amateur isn't naive enough to freshly handle novelty. Nor is the amateur's passion tempered by rigor, defended by degrees and honorifics, broadened by liberal exposure to adjacent disciplines, and channeled through testing and recursion. The amateur is neither dumb enough to be smart nor smart enough to be brilliant. The rank amateur, the Sunday painter, the dabbler, the dilettante: nothing mad about these figures; not an occult or criminal figure. Victor Frankenstein, if I recall, was a failure in school because he hungered for exploded knowledge, alchemy, Paracelsus, dead (but not dead enough) ends. The amateur isn't an adept or isn't quite adept, having not yet attained anything but the love, which is blind and blinding. Barthes writes movingly about the amateur musician.

So, has the Order has explicitly attended to the status of the amateur? To failed credentials? To mere love? And if the order is a “secret society,” then does the Order disparage the amateur also for his obscene, all too visible and audible, enthusiasm? For being a busy-body? Is there another way of saying “I would like to...” without running aground?

2. Distraction and Illusion. I would like to see [...] more attention to the relation between, on the one hand, seeing what's there, and on the other, seeing what's not there but what testifies to the intrusion, intervention, the constitutive powers of eye & mind & habit. E.g. do we the audience fail the [test of attending to a black dot on a card], as [Inyard Kip Ketchem] claims, because we begin seeing things, i.e., not the dot itself, but the throbbing, drifting halos, the gradations of tone, the depth, dot-as-hole or dot-as-floating-mass? Or do we fail if we don't see these? If [Ketchem's] Elixir of Attention cures us of distraction (or puts distraction to work in a particular way, à la Benjamin), then do we, now well-armed, simply have more endurance and appreciation for “centripetal distraction”? Or do we see something otherwise obscure, ill-defined? “A Hawk's Eye, the Vision of an Eagle” on the card makes me think that seeing-on-drugs is to be keener, more precise, absolutely veridical, God-like. But perhaps the elixir aims to help us see how and that we see? In time? Mediated by flesh, blood, experience? To make us connoisseurs of drift, illusion, exhaustion? To make us sensitive to the impossibility of stillness? Also, is there room to disparage seeing-too-much? The Hawk & Eagle are hunters, are discerning; they set aside and ignore the non-prey; they see movement.

So, if the standard protocol aims to help liberate attention from the veridical, from the surfer's blitz, and from hermeneutics, from predator-prey relations, does it split these

liberations between illusion (“optical illusion is optical truth”) and imagination? Are there other modes?

3. Made Things and Mimesis. How to relate the Order’s founding myths, from Pliny to Ausonius, and the eponymous third bird, not only to mimesis but to creation? Ostensibly, the third bird doesn’t fall prey to the simulation but enjoys the spectacle: the image itself as well as her kindred—the first two birds—falling prey to it. But not only that: the third bird sees that the things on display are also things; i.e., the third bird looks *through* Zeuxis’s canvas to the grapes and the boy but also *at* the canvas as a canvas. And finally the third looks to the purposes, whether to deceive or edify or ensnare or please. The third bird sees the thing, the thing made, and the thing having been made for various purposes. This triple duty works best for artworks that either make an issue of mimesis and of the mimetic faculty, or test their capacity to be the thing on display. Magritte’s “La trahison des images” (“Ceci n’est pas une pipe”) would allegorize this predicament. It’s an image; it says it’s an image; and it relies on pedagogical uses: vocabulary, the flashcard and quiz.

So, while the standard protocol could be applied to made things or perhaps to anything whatsoever, event-things as well as processes, do the myths constrain outcomes? E.g., while most works of art are to-be-encountered in a relatively passive way, might there be a protocol for a meal, for a card game, for playing a musical instrument, for drawing? Or to put this differently, Nietzsche complained that works of art had been, since Kant (and before), thought from the point of view of the spectator and not from the point of view of the creator. What protocol could enjoin us to create alongside of an artwork or made thing? Attending to a painting by looking at it makes a certain kind of sense: the painting was made to be seen and is displayed for the eye and body in motion, at least ideally. Attending to a hammer – the proverbial hammer of the philosophers – by looking at it only makes sense during certain games: the game of “where’s the hammer?” and “is this one the right one for the job?” Duchamp’s “Fountain” is the exception that proves this rule.

4. Sincerity. How does (or should) the Order square the doctrinal sincerity of the protocol with the fictive chutzpah of its myths, the invented progenitors, the darling charlatans and posers? Is it “Fake it ‘til you make it”? Or “Fake it while you make it”? Or “Make faking it a way to make it”? Or “Make it and let others worry about faking it.” To be credulous before a work of art, to surrender and greet and turn away and then say, “Baby come back, any kind of fool could see / There was something in everything about you!” Credulity is a virtue: openness, vulnerability, impartiality. But so is feigned credulity: performance, irony, critical distance.

So, do the performance lectures help to thicken and steady the experiences of the birds? Or are the lectures meant to trouble the credulity of the would-be adepts? Are the lectures all-in-good-fun, an elixir of sorts? Or are they warnings? Do they model Pascal on belief: “kneel, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”? Or do they model the priority of invention?

[...]

Thanks again!