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The Uses of Art

dispersed holdings

IMAGINE YOURSELF

Imagine yourself in a museum. Say it's the Metropolitan. You've just walked up the grand staircase eager to see art, eager to see something great, something that will alter the trajectory of your day (or even—is this the secret hope?—the trajectory of your life).

You arrive at the top of the stairs and face a huge painting, stately in its gilded frame. Surely it's a Great Work, or the curators of the Metropolitan wouldn't have put it right there, greeting you, greeting everyone. It depicts a **bewildering crowd** of people and horses, some kind of procession or festival with a glowering man in the center and a chariot behind.

Let's say you stop to give it a look. You quickly feel like a boulder in a rushing stream of visitors. Everyone seems to be trying to get someplace else. The nearby guard answers questions in a continuous flow: the bathrooms are to the right, the American wing is to the left. Hardly anyone does more than glance at the painting; it is hidden in plain sight.

You read the wall label, it's a Tiepolo, *The Triumph of Marius*. Now what?

The Uses of Art begins in **this awkward moment** of encounter. A viewer meets a work. What happens next? If you knew some art historical details, you might know that Tiepolo painted himself into this scene, that he's peering out at you from one side of the painting. What does he see when he looks at you? What do you want from the painting? And what does it want from you? Art history, while valuable, isn't much help in knowing what to do with yourself as you stand there, even if you do happen to know where this painting fits in the forward march of European civilization.

After you've read the wall label, and listened to the audio guide or the docent tour, the museum gives up and sends you on to the next piece. It has little to tell you beyond anecdotes and facts. You may think that the very greatness of the painting will or should guide or seduce you. But what if it doesn't?

Or put yourself in another situation, one that's more contemporary. What would you do if an artwork came up to you and said, "Hello"? If it looked like an eight-year-old girl, if it told you its name was Isabel, if it asked you to follow?

The particular work I'm thinking of is *This Progress*, by Tino Sehgal. For his solo show at the Guggenheim he took over the spiral ramp with nothing but a troupe of players carrying on conversations with visitors. A work of art like this needs you: it walks right up to you and starts talking. It asks you, "What is progress?", then it stands there waiting for you to say something back.

What will you say?

We live in a moment when you can look around on the subway, or in an airport lounge—anywhere people are paused or waiting—and see most heads bowed over small glowing screens. Entertainment is everywhere, as are image and representation; as are rhetoric, propaganda, argument, advertising. If these—among the traditional functions of art—are overtaken by the scintillating gadgets we carry in our pockets, one might imagine that art itself would simply wither away.

It withers not.

Perversely, there are more artists now than ever before in history. There are more galleries, museums, festivals, art fairs, and biennials. Record prices are being set at auction,

record attendance at museums: millions pass through the doors of the Metropolitan, MoMA, the Tate Modern, the Louvre. Most days these museums are so thronged you have to fight to get a seat in one of their cafés.

Museum-goers move among the halls and galleries like fastidious shoppers. They pause in their progress and conversation to nod judiciously here and there, they read a few words or fiddle with their floor plans, glance about, walk on. We look at many things and we see almost nothing.

As an artist, this situation is a puzzle and a thorn. How can there be such a huge gap between the blockbuster popularity of art and the ordinary poverty of its experience? It is like a sumptuous feast everyone wants to be at, where no one is eating the food. We don't know how to use art, to take in even a fraction of all that abundant potential experience.

Critics and theorists have looked at who makes art, and why, at how and where it is made, how it is bought and sold, at the conditions of its exhibition and institutionalization. These have been subject to critical analysis and rethinking, but there's been relatively little thought and conversation devoted to what happens to the work once it enters the experience of a person.

The manifestos of the avant-garde all assume that art is the primary agent. They are about what the art is going to do to us—*wake us up! Make us more alive!* Art will destroy, art will electrify, art will heal, art will enliven. It's time for a new kind of manifesto, about what *we* are going to do with art.

The problems of art's autonomy, its failed utopianism, its shattered hopes, even its retreat into irony, coyness, or glib self-satisfaction, are all predicated on a view of art in which the artwork is central. This is what gives art and the

art world its quality of self-absorption. It's what makes it seem indifferent or even antagonistic to ordinary life (even as it keeps incorporating more and more of the 'ordinary' within itself). It's what gives art the at once fascinating and repellant gloss of narcissism.

All this can be upended, flipped around, in a kind of reverse Copernican gesture. Take art or the artwork out of the center of the solar system, and place the person experiencing it there. Art is free to go on, serene in its autonomy, tied up with its own questions, playing its endgames. All that's fine. It's not art anymore that needs to make the shift. It's us.

The book is written in very brief chapters, with four overarching sections. The first, "Dance of Attention," focuses on how attention works and how we can slow down enough to bring ourselves more effectively to works of art. The second, "Erotics of Being," talks about how art comes alive in experience. These themes are developed in "The Uses of Art," which opens the questions of what art can do to us, and what we can do with it. Finally, "Correspondence Society" offers a vision of a new social relationship with art.

What are the uses of art? I argue that use is ruthless and personal. Art is toy and tool, dream, fetish, and idol. It is available to worship and to hate. It comes to find us, and we find ourselves in it. Selves multiply as we entangle ourselves with objects and experience, various and incommensurable. Ultimately, the experience of art is ours to make.

PART I

DANCE OF ATTENTION

By Lamplight

Here's a painting, a dream: *Woman Sewing by Lamplight*, painted sometime between 1870 and 1872 by Jean-François Millet. It depicts what its title names, a woman sewing by lamplight. She's young, late teens or early twenties, her head bending towards her work. Behind her in the hazy glow farther from the lamp is a sleeping child, his face flushed and bruised with illness. She sits close, not watching the child, but watching over his sleep. There is something of perfect calm in the girl's face—she must be anxious for the child, but what I see is accepting tenderness, a concentration over her work which is not complete absorption but which diffuses like the light of the lamp from the bright point of her needle to fill the room with a kind of glow. I look at her clothes: white cap covering her hair, heavy red cloth around her shoulders and crossing at her chest, striped blanket over her lap. The fullness of her dark blue sleeve occupies the lower right of the painting until it fades into the shadows of the room. The room must be chilly, but she seems at ease, not hunching or clenching.

The light of the painting's title is given off by the open flame of a small oil lamp fastened high on the child's bedstead. The effects of the painting are of light and glaze and shimmer. In her lap, on top of the blanket, is the piece she is working on, to my eye a heavily knit sweater or blanket cascading in thick, variegated folds in shades of brown, black, darkened ochre. She holds a thick needle upright, glinting in the light, and from it comes one bright, translucent thread of yarn stretched taut.

So here we are, not citizens of Millet's time, which was the fading quarter of the nineteenth century. We never see women sewing in their homes by open flame into the night. The idea is so far from us in the history of ordinary experience that it is not even nostalgic. Millet's virtuosity with paint and depiction is apparent even without connoisseurship—there is a strange glistening quality to the painting, a buildup of *translucent veils of color* that make the light seem a thick liquid, like honey. But is virtuosity enough to make us pause? We live in an age of dazzling optical effects produced by casual electricities, by cheap gadgets, by innumerable screen simulations in the most ordinary ad, TV show, video game. Our phones shine and seduce. We see pictures of faces and faraway scenes everywhere we look. An age of miracles.

To have an encounter with a painting like this you can't just stroll by. Glancing here, glancing there, *waiting for your gaze to be captivated*, you will almost certainly walk past the painting, barely pausing, letting only the faintest impression linger.

To see a painting like this, it is necessary to stop. There are a hundred masterpieces in the surrounding rooms, but for a time, at least, their calls for attention must be resisted. There is an effort at this moment. An effort to bring yourself to the work.

What will you see if you look longer, look harder? Of course I don't know. At the moment anyone begins to see a painting, they begin to make it. Even the facts of the painting will shape themselves to your seeing. A friend who looked at this painting saw a wagon wheel in the shadows. Another saw a spinning wheel. I saw no such thing

(months later, studying the painting, I noticed painted rings of light haloing the lamp—were these rings what appeared as a wheel to my friends' eyes?). Is the girl old enough to be the mother of the child? Is she a sister? An indifferent housemaid? Is she content, tender, anxious, sorrowful? Is she attentive to the child or so absorbed in her work that she neglects him? Is the child boy or girl, sick or sleeping peacefully?

And I don't know if your feet might be hurting, if the room is crowded or spare, if you're preoccupied by a phone conversation you had earlier, if you're feeling lonely, or anxious, or thrilled. I don't know if you've studied paintings like these, or always avoided them, if you like domestic life in general or if you fear it.

One familiar way to spend your time in front of a painting like this might be to listen to the audio guide, read the wall label, try to learn about the circumstances in which it was painted, place the artist historically, guess at his concerns and what he might have been trying to convey. In doing this, you place yourself in the hands of experts and connoisseurs, those who know much more than you, or appear to. But none of them are standing there, and most importantly, none of them are you.

In truth, the painting can do nothing, mean nothing, without you. It needs more of you than the scraps of fact you can glean by leaning into the little paragraph mounted on the wall.

The painter may be a great one, and the painting a masterpiece, but they are as nothing without you. You, as you are—sore feet, scattered mind, unable to remember from some art history class years ago just why Millet was supposed

to be important. Didn't Van Gogh maybe like him? Were there haystacks? You, a little impressed by the paint handling but not stopped in your tracks, ready to walk on into the next room, and the next, until it's time for a cup of coffee.

Greater expertise might make you more confident, but it does nothing, by itself, to bring the painting to life—if anything, experts tend to categorize efficiently and move on: “Ah, yes, one of Millet's domestic scenes, a fair example though not his best.” From the painting's point of view this kind of diagnosis is no better than a dismissal.

The painting, in this moment, needs you, exactly you. Nothing less.

This Mutual Dreaming

So, how to begin? From this **unpromising** beginning, what?

Arguably, the simplest and most important gift you can give the painting is time. Just that. Stay.

Here's what happened between that painting and me, unlikely pairing that we were. My friend Jac had suggested something: that I come to the painting as if it were my own dream. **If I had dreamed** her, what did it say about what I desired? Desire is a twisty thing in dreaming, appearing disguised and inverted, mirrored, metaphored. But that day I wasn't feeling twisty—symbols and reversals didn't occur to me. Instead, I was having, on the simplest level, a bad day, with waves of uncharacteristic resentment at the smallest obstacles.

So, in that moment, I took his instruction rather differently than I might have otherwise: dream as wish, as

undisguised desire. I looked at the painting, and because it was a dream, stopped seeing it as a painting. It wasn't a made thing; it had no maker. The idea that I was dreaming let me fall in, forgetting the room, the frame, the wall, the sounds of the people around me. The stillness and quiet of the painting came out to encompass me. I let my gaze roam the lit surfaces, the bright lamp, the bedpost, the cap covering her hair, the fabric at her shoulders, the child's round cheeks and white sheets, but most of all her face held in profile, mostly in shadow but marked with a glowing line that traveled brow to nose, picking out her upper lip and chin. I watched the expression on her face, and found that yes, I did desire this. The clarity of her task: the boy was sick, someone had to sit up with him, the sweater had torn or unraveled, it needed mending. The girl's life at that moment seemed comprised of necessities rather than choices and her demeanor seemed to express a sense of repose in those necessities. I saw tenderness there in her attention to her work and alertness to any movement from the child. I saw acceptance. I saw a moment when it seemed that intention, action, need, and feeling all clarified into one gesture. She held the needle high, thread taut. I could imagine the stars unseen overhead, wheeling slowly around that stillness, that still point. I could imagine myself, from where I was in space and time, held equally in the clarity of that long moment. My own desire settled, aligning to match my action and circumstance.

I stepped away for a little while, breaking the dream, looking around the museum gallery, listening to voices and conversations, seeing feet and coats and faces. When I came back to the painting, I flipped the game: I wasn't dreaming her, now she was dreaming me.

She is standing in an elegant red-walled room where paintings are hung in spacious order. She has just come in from the street, and she wishes she could go back out, to pause in a crowded intersection and stare up at the sky. All the life around her, all the variousness, a whole city spreading in every direction, hurrying with innumerable purposes. In such a city, you could do anything, be anything, be always becoming.

She is dreaming that she is me, remember, so she is dreaming not so much her own naïve startlement (as I might imagine it) but rather a full dose of what, on this particular day, is a hot mess of dissatisfaction, a spike of crankiness. And I ask myself, as I try to do this flipping of perspectives, how could she possibly be wanting this? Could she desire resentment, confusion, moments of urban rage, a critical eye cast over the display of wealth and power the room represents?

Suddenly I feel I know just what she wants. She wants to stand up from the chair in which she had been sitting so quietly, to step up and away from all that certainty. She wants to be in a city, free to leave, to walk outside, to turn her face to the sky, to wear jeans, to be with friends talking and drinking coffee or a glass of wine, to be able to alter the trajectory of her life, go to India with no phone, climb the Himalayas, move to a small town in Alaska and start over, work in a diner off the highway. She wants to be too hot instead of chilled, she wants to be resentful instead of accepting, she wants not to love, she wants to be able to turn away, put down caring like you could put down your sewing; she wants to doubt, to be angry, free.

And in that moment, the sense I have of my own life shifts. A strange sense of doubling, of being separated

from my life, which I had been aware of all day, falls away. Frustration itself becomes something worthwhile, connected to life. All the bad feelings inhabiting me, by becoming something I imagine she would choose, and choose gladly, also become something I choose gladly.

Obviously, this set of imaginary gymnastics has as much to do with me as with the painting. I bring my own life to it, the city I live in, the historical time I inhabit, my moods, dispositions, preoccupations, my way of perceiving the space in which the painting is hung, the body sensation of being overheated, my social world, scattered bits of knowledge about art history, *filmy layers of past* experience looking at and making art, everything.

But it's not as if the painting itself isn't there. I do my best to perceive it, to observe and notice its attributes, to register its temper. I give it a long look (very long by museum-going standards). How much does it matter—or in what way does it matter—that I don't know much about Millet? Even what little I do know, I've largely put aside in this mutual dreaming. The painting and I have had an encounter, we have meant something to one another. I have no way of knowing if anything I experienced or imagined aligned with the intentions or desires of the artist. I had an encounter with myself as much as anything. And yet there were aspects of the experience that could have never occurred without the specific physicality of the painting.

What would it be like to keep going? What would it mean to put aside for a time the canons of art criticism and art history, to forget omniscience, judgment, and being right, and instead look at art idiosyncratically and personally, as if it were part of lived experience, part of the dream of the self?

Ways of Seeing

“The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.” —John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

As you may already be feeling, this book has a manifesto: to offer art viewers—to offer you—the same freedoms that artists have won over the last century of experimentation and revolution; to make art useful, not in the ordinary sense of social utility, but useful in a very personal way. To use a work of art in this way is to make it come fully alive in the self, to realize it.

Underlying this manifesto is a theory of art. It may not seem that most people need a theory of art, but I would argue that they do, that we all do. In fact I would argue that we all have one—whether we are aware of it or not—and our theory of what art is, and what it is for, fundamentally affects what we feel we can and cannot do, should and should not do, in relation to art.

If we feel that art is something made by very unusual people, by virtuosic geniuses gifted (from birth? from the gods?) with uncanny talent, we are likely to believe that art is inherently difficult to approach or understand, and that it requires experts. When we come across something that looks strange or unbeautiful, it is easy to imagine that we are not equipped to understand what we are seeing.

I want a more open-handed art theory, one which gives space for more kinds of connections with works of art. I need this for myself, as a viewer of art, and I also need it to feel more hopeful as a maker of art.