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The unknowable truth in art, or What has love got to do with it?

> How can we know an image if the image is the very thing [...] that imperils—through its power to take hold of us, which is to say its *call to imagine*—the positive or "objective" exercise of knowledge? If the image is what makes us imagine, and if the (sensible) imagination is an obstacle to (intelligible) knowledge, how then can one *know an image*?[1]

Art and knowledge

LET ME BEGIN by spatializing my dilemma. Starting this article, I feel squeezed between the prospect of two mountains, indeed enormous mountain ranges, stretching into a world landscape, towards a shifting and receding horizon. We know them as Art, on the one side, and Knowledge, on the other. Our task now, if I have understood our brief correctly, is to reflect upon the relationship between them.[2]

The relationship between these metaphorical mountains is of course asymmetrical, however much the two may tower above us in equally awe-inspiring measures, and however far they both seem to extend into the present conception of what we call the past. The question before us is not, I take it, to establish whether connections or associations between them are possible, whether we can establish a bridge between them, but, instead, how the one can be said to be grounded, covered or defined by the other.

Is art, in other words, possible to know? What knowledge could we bestow upon art? What would it entail to *know art*? What can we never know about what we call art? We can obviously know a thousand and one

1. Didi-Huberman 2005, pp. xvi–xvii.
2. I borrow the term "brief" from the chapter on a historical bridge in Baxandall 1985, pp. 12–40.

Figure 1. Twin peaks near Eklutna Lake, Alaska, United States, 2008.

things about it, but *knowing it*, period?[3] The task may seem insurmountable, but perhaps we must just differentiate between different forms of knowing. Addressing the "unknowability of the art object", Karen Lang reminds us that "art history trades in aesthetic objects, objects for which the truth claims of any interpretation nestle around a still point of uncertainty".[4] We *might* know something of importance here, we are just not sure. In contrast to Lang's estimation, Georges Didi-Huberman laments that the discipline of art history is characterized by a Kantian "tone of certainty", related to reason and an insatiable quest for knowledge, for which he chiefly blames Erwin Panofsky.[5]

One reason why these two mountains appear so intimidating is that they are both of our own making. They look like mountains and appear to be natural, but they are cultural through and through, which means

3. An analogous interest would be whether what we call knowledge is possible without art, where the latter must be understood in its antique sense of doing something skillfully, like practising the art of reasoning or of drawing conclusions. This, however, I will leave out of the present discussion.

4. Lang 2006, pp. 196–197.

5. Didi-Huberman 2005, pp. 1–9.

that we are looking at them and into ourselves at the same time. We have made them both up, in the sense of naming and categorizing them as part of our human universe, but for a long time we have also tried hard to mark distance to them, as if they were mere elements of the external world we are trying to navigate and understand.[6] The twin peaks of Art and Knowledge have been so thoroughly naturalized for so long that it appears futile to even begin localizing their origins.

Art and chaos

In his musings on what was at the time taken to be the first expressions of human "art" making, following the recent discovery of the Lascaux Cave, Georges Bataille wrote that

> [a]t the very heart of existence, we find a kind of chaos, a gaping void perhaps, which conceals a chaotic delirium. At the heart of existence, we find art, and we find poetry, and we find a multitude of religions. Yet no one knows what art is. Or poetry, for that matter. No one, in the end, knows what religion is.[7]

Art is at the heart of existence, along with chaos, allegedly. Or perhaps more accurately: *preceded* by chaos, in which case cave art becomes a kind of cosmic force, a means to handle, manage or just express the most archaic conditions of our existence. But the same might be valid also for the other term, the mountain, invoked here by Bataille, of knowledge. Might it not be said that not-knowledge or ignorance is at the heart of existence as well? That art and knowledge are complementary ways to come to terms with our primordial sense of chaos, however hard it would be to know how this would be achieved? Bataille claims that we—unclear whether humans, as such, or just his modern contemporaries—do not know what art, poetry or religion is. But this he knows. I know that I do not know, and I claim to know that no one knows what these phenomena are, he says. The rock bottom of this knowledge is evidently *not-knowledge*.

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6. This refers to a post-Kantian period, since for him Knowledge was both exterior and interior to the subject, marking fundamentally what we could ever hope to say truthfully about aesthetic objects such as art.

7. Bataille 2005, p. 121.

Art and life

Long before we could have even addressed our existence as humans, we might inquire into the development of life as such, which reveals a deeper kind of chaos, our essence, perhaps, including "the whirling, unpredictable movement of forces, vibratory oscillations that constitute the universe", which may not only be understood as disorder, but, rather, as "a plethora of orders, forms, wills", in the words of Elizabeth Grosz.[8] In such remote beginnings, she continues, "life can only exist and perpetuate itself to the extent that it can extract from the whirling and experientially overwhelming chaos that is nature, materiality, and their immanent forces those elements, substances, or processes it requires [...]" Now if this process can be (scientifically) known, why not also the process by which artworks in their universe of art are adapted to their shifting circumstances, how they take from their environment what they require to function and work as artwork? Linking art with the above-mentioned forces, Gilles Deleuze underlines that "[i]n art, as in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces."[9] I will return to these questions below, to what we may agree upon regarding what is *required* from an artwork. What it may "want" may not be the question so much as what we feel, think or know it actually does (if it is able to operate according to its brief).[10]

Taking leave of the dimly lit cradle of humankind, invoked here, let us focus on the period where we, in the Western world, actually do know what we mean by art and artworks (roughly from the Renaissance onwards). I will circumvent the ancient and medieval civilizations, as well as those outside the Western world, just to narrow down what the mountain called Art really entails, and, despite numerous revisions of the concept of art, still entails. The mountain of Knowledge, I will take to be of ancient Greek origin (*episteme*), knowing full well that other civilizations have had other concepts and ways to deal with knowledge as well as truth.

8. Grosz 2008, pp. 5–6.

9. Deleuze 2002, p. 56.

10. In his widely referenced book, Mitchell seems to me to over-emphasize intention and volition (the virtual over the actual), if also transferred to the object of art itself. Mitchell 2005.

Art and artworks

For the terms of our discussion, I wish to make clear that I will not speak of art in this context, but of artworks, or works of art—individual cases, that is, of the so-called visual arts. Why? Art is simply too broad a concept to use, forcing us constantly to emphasize that it is only the visual or graphic arts, *Bildkunst*, to which we are referring, not any art, or the arts, or art as such. The fact that the mountain of Art is the mountain of art *as such*, that is, a generic mountain, is one reason it appears so disturbing and frigid to me. The notion of art (or Art) is also much too theoretical for my interests, and despite our custom to speak of "art" as an abbreviation of artworks (as in the phrase "have you seen any good art lately?"), art/Art is notoriously hard to disconnect from the categorical concept of art—a privileged domain of philosophy called aesthetics, invented in the mid-18th century in Europe, based on Roman constructs. This concept ought to be central, one would think, to the discipline of art history, developed in its modern, academic guise in the German-speaking mid-19th century, but it is not.

Whereas Grosz argues that "concepts are by-products or effects rather than the very material of art", this polarization is not correct, however, since, if by art we mean not a removed super-category but an instance of it—one or more *works* of art—it is clear that any such work is a constellation, composition or assemblage, of both a concept of art and a material carrier, support or medium.[11] To speak of "the very material of art" when it comes to a work of visual art is too material or only addressing half of it. Its material part, as Theodor Adorno underlines, is necessarily and immanently in conflict with its non-material art part. An artwork is a thing which constitutively subverts its material thing-character.

Art historians, in general, take the concept of art for granted, as the unarticulated centre of their broad or specific interest in art. Art historians know, as well, that theoretical deliberations on different concepts of art may be safely delegated to the specialized cadre of theoreticians (within or without our discipline). Art historians on average, however, realize that, as Panofsky famously observed, unless "theory is received at the door of an empirical discipline, [it] comes in through the chimney like a ghost and upsets the furniture", to which he adds that a similar requirement must be entrusted to history vis-à-vis a theoretical disci-

11. Grosz 2008, p. 4.

pline unless its groundwork be undermined.[12] Art historians, in general, are empirical scholars; they deal with works of art (in whatever shape or form, age or category), but do not have to bother with the abstract minutiae of concepts of art. They have to tackle the tricky questions of theory and method in processing their "material", however, and must always be prepared to justify their decisions and what they think that they are doing, but they do not have to deal with art.

Art and agency

Speaking of the work of art as *working* may evoke the theoretical discussion within the (post)humanities and social sciences in recent years on the relationship between art and agency. I see no need to rehearse this debate at any length here and, besides, I find it largely misunderstood, both by its advocates and its detractors.[13] Clearly, however, no theoretical special pleading is warranted to argue that artworks (have the capacity to) work, act and demand things from their viewers and interactors.[14] Although artworks cannot be trusted to always and everywhere perform such a function, they do, as part of their current definition of art, have the capacity (one sense of agency) to stir, trigger, evoke, move, unleash, etc., responses among their attentive receivers. Now, whether this is accomplished is of course always a case of a reciprocal transaction, a call-and-response encounter, a "dialogue", metaphorically speaking, or a mutual, two-way communicative kind of engagement. This, at least, is the traditional point of view—relevant to most art historians.

Another, more powerful way to phrase what art is capable of, to follow how Grosz puts it (summarily), is this:

> Art engenders becomings, not imaginative becomings [...] but material becomings, in which [...] imponderable universal forces touch and become enveloped in life, in which life folds over itself to em-

12. Panofsky 1974, p. 22.

13. Many supporters seem satisfied to empirically confirm Latour's simplification —"*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor"— while many critics worry about these relationships being animistic, i.e. too dangerously close to primitive or savage thought. Latour 2007, p. 1. For a critical review on similar issues, cf. Rampley 2021.

14. Just to mention a few recent art-historical sources arguing as much, albeit quite differently: Freedberg 1989; Gell 1998; Mitchell 2005; Hantelmann 2010; van Eck 2015; Bredekamp 2018.

> brace its contact with materiality, in which each exchanges some elements or particles with the other to become more and other.

Adding that art, in this interpretation, is "culture's most intense debt to the chaotic forces it characterizes as nature", it becomes difficult to ascertain what of this, if regarded accurate, can be epistemologically evidenced. Grosz's interest is in ontology, as is mine, but this suspends the whole issue, it seems, of establishing the limits of knowing visual art. What art and philosophy share, according to Grosz, is

> their capacity to enlarge the universe by enabling its potential to be otherwise, to be framed through concepts and affects. They are among the most forceful ways in which culture generates a small space of chaos within chaos where chaos can be *elaborated, felt, thought*.[15]

Yes, but *known*? I do not know.

A central notion, according to this account of art, is "plane of composition", deriving from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and which sounds familiar enough, but is not equal to just any composition of the image, screen or canvas:

> The plane of composition is the field, the plane of all artworks, all genres, all types of art, the totality of all the various forms of artistic production in no particular order of organization, that which is indirectly addressed and transformed through each work of art.[16]

It is as if the work of art was not so much, or really at all, a product of an artist, objectivized by a subject, but itself a kind of autonomous relay, filtering deep cultural forces and affects, from within the chaos of our life existence, which the individual artwork is simultaneously able to transform. "The artwork is a compound of sensations, composed sensations, sensations composed through materials in their particularity."[17]

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15. Grosz 2008, pp. 23–24; italics added.
16. Grosz 2008, p. 70.
17. Grosz 2008, p. 74.

Art and framing

If we leave the grand visions and theories behind for a moment, according to which art(works) are the screens of life, existence, culture, etc., resounding with Freudian themes of forces from the past disrupting the present, let us look at the matter from a more direct and practical angle. One way to do so is through the notion of the frame.[18]

"Framing is the means by which objects are delimited, qualities unleashed and art made possible", which means that if art is to be known, it will first have to be framed or "territorialized", in the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari on which Grosz draws.[19] Without a frame, figuratively speaking, a work of art cannot be contained as an object or work, but will overflow its limits, deterritorialize and even re-enter chaos. Such a frame is a crucial but pragmatic feature, since needed, in the last instance, to distinguish art from non-art. Following the drift of Grosz's reasoning, however, it should be mentioned that, in modern art, broadly conceived, the artwork is not just elevated, squeezed between or compartmentalized inside its frame, but may also rework and thus transform its own framing condition, as in so many attempts of avant-garde art or so-called anti-art.[20]

Framing practices encompass everything from literal frames or plinths to titles, descriptions, conservation reports, historiographical representation, exhibition spaces, critical judgements, second-order representation (visual and textual reproduction) and more. All of this can certainly be known, but how to value such a listing of—facts, certainties, information? Let us dig deeper into the depths of an artwork, withholding, for the time being, the consequences of the following point on which we could possibly all agree: that to access a work of art, besides just glancing at it, a personal commitment is needed since "art requires engagement".[21] Such preconditions are of course neither accumulated under any framing device, nor listed among the most definitive scholarly accounts of a single work of art, the entries of a catalogue raisonné. While frames and catalogues approach the work with philosophical and technical rigour, they do so from outside.

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18. The by-now classical locus for this discussion is the interpretation by Derrida of the work and its frame, based on Kant: Derrida 1987, pp. 37–82.
19. Grosz 2008, p. 17.
20. On this theme, cf. Duro 1996.
21. Lang 2006, p. 197.

Art and reasoning catalogues

A catalogue raisonné lists, at least, the following information about the work in question:

> Title and title variations, Dimension/Size, Date of the work, Medium, Current location/owner at time of publication, Provenance (history of ownership), Exhibition history, Condition of the work, Bibliography/Literature that discusses the work, Essay(s) on the artist, Critical assessments and remarks, Full description of the work, Signatures, Inscriptions, and Monograms of the artist, Reproduction of each work, List of works attributed, lost, destroyed, and fakes, Catalog number.[22]

This package of information on a single work of art is clearly essential to scholars determined to investigate the work in question. What goes unsaid here, however, is that these accounts, which presume to be definitive, only exist for artists of a certain commonly acclaimed notoriety or fame. Although these lists are commonly seen as almost too object-oriented and plain, they are fundamentally subject-oriented. The idea of a catalogue raisonné must be something like this: the important artist is important (to art history) on account of having produced a number of important works, also known as masterpieces, wherefore it would be valuable for art history to list *all* of the works of said artist—in one word the *oeuvre*—regardless of the quality of these works, which may be referred to as secondary, lesser, minor or downright inferior.

To give a current example of how a large museum collection is presented online, if not by way of a literal catalogue raisonné, I chose this small painting, *The Tempest* by Peder Balke (currently not on display) from the National Gallery in London.

About this image, with the inventory number NG6614, we learn the following:

> The Norwegian painter Peder Balke's tiny monochromatic paintings on panel are among his most original works. He created them for his own pleasure after a lack of commercial success led him to give up trying to make a living as a professional artist in the 1860s. The fact that he was not aiming to sell them gave him the

22. New York Public Library, "What is a catalogue raisonné".

> freedom to experiment with new techniques and radically simplified compositions.
>
> Here the mighty power of nature is condensed in miniature, with a palette restricted to shades of black and white. Sea and sky are conveyed with deft sweeps of the brush while the boats and seagulls are touched in with strokes of calligraphic delicacy. There is no landmark to indicate a specific place, but the scene was inspired by the turbulent seas off the coast of north Norway, which Balke had experienced at first hand.[23]

What knowledge are we gaining here? The first sentence is an unsupported critical judgement, highlighting the value of comparing an artist's work within the oeuvre (in search of the best, which is here translated into the importance of being original). The second sentence gives insight into his motivations and contains references to commercial transactions. The closing line of the first paragraph draws rather bold conclusions regarding the licence of the artist to "experiment" since he did not intend to sell these panels, which leaves us with a mildly depressing image of the unadventurous taste of the normal buyers or collectors. In the second paragraph, we are directed towards the image itself, which is credited with condensing nature—without the use of colour! Balke's technique is characterized along with an art-critical appreciation of the result. A comparison with calligraphy is presumably intended to speak to the value and quality of the production as well as the product. The next sentence is still as if located somewhere within the painted image, commenting on the scene's relation to land, on the one hand, and to experiences of the artist of rough weather in northern Norway, on the other. It is claimed that the artist was inspired by these dramatic non-art encounters, which serves, it seems, to forge a strong connection between art and reality, thus affirming the value of such connections (some version of realism).

The text on *The Tempest* is short and resembles the didactic exhibition screens in large museums, addressing the public at large. Besides the detailed information of a work in a catalogue raisonné, addressing the specialists, this is like a resumé—maybe caricature—of the discourse of art or art criticism, which eventually ends up as art history. None of this is other than circumstantial, however, since this work of art by Balke is

Figure 2. Peder Balke (1804–1887), *The Tempest*, *c.* 1862, oil on wood panel, 10.3 × 12.2 cm, The National Gallery, London.

23. The National Gallery, "Balke, Peder"; the information on Balke derives from the Provenance Guide (selected museum-based provenance projects) of the IFAR (International Foundation for Art Research, www.ifar.org).

inevitably held hostage to interests exterior to the work, interests other than the truth content of the work, as described by some of the theorists on this subject to whom I will turn in a moment.

Obviously, however, and again, any work of art requires to be *encountered*, met with a response, which is then taken to trigger a concomitant response, somehow, from the work vis-à-vis the respondent, in the famous "hermeneutical circle"—derived from Wilhelm Dilthey via Martin Heidegger before it became associated with Hans-Georg Gadamer. The problems of hermeneutics notwithstanding, regarding, for example, its emphasis on meaning and closure, instead of opening to a notion of the work itself ending up transformed, as I have argued,[24] we still have to acknowledge that it is an encounter we are dealing with, between the work and its viewer, which Graham Harman has described as a unified kind of object, a *compound*.[25] This may all sound self-evident, but we should remind ourselves that the most tired and well-worn cliché about the artwork is that it is an object created by a subject. What I am interested in pursuing further is to depart from this age-old entanglement to forward, instead, an understanding of the object (conventionally put) of the artwork as a kind of subject (unrelated to artists and viewers). Timothy Morton has stressed that "[t]hings are exactly what they are, yet never as they seem, and this means that they are virtually indistinguishable from the beings we call *people*."[26] I think this pertains especially to artworks (which I am not comfortable speaking of as things, or objects, by the way). There is a striking sense, however, in which artworks resemble persons, or more to the point, how we tend to meet and encounter other human beings, but before we approach this theme, we should reflect upon the relationship between art and truth.

Art and truth

In an anthology devoted to subjectivity and methodology in art history, Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf writes that "[t]here have been more or less outspoken claims on 'objective' truth in art-historical discourse, to match the status of a research activity, providing knowledge." Her first example is Panofsky and his followers, who have tended to "hide the

24. Karlholm 2016, esp. p. 43. I would now add that Gadamer's equation of *understanding* with "a real fusion of horizons" is a further stumbling block for me, since *fusion* is irreversible and final and could preferably, from my horizon, be substituted with something more temporary like concurrence. Gadamer 1979, p. 273.

25. Harman 2018, pp. 88–89.

26. Morton 2018a, p. 81.

subjective reactions of the scholar in a pseudo-objective language".[27] The problem with this problem for me, now, is that it seems to confirm the very phenomenon it challenges. Unless "subjective reactions" are factored in, any claim to "objective" truth will be false. Pseudo-objectivity is thus the enemy of true objectivity, since for objectivity to prevail, subjectivity must be accounted for. If such a qualified, not to say conflicted, objectivity is the goal—the sibling of knowledge, evidence and truth—the road to reach it seems challenging and devoid of shortcuts. In Didi-Huberman's questioning of Panofsky, presented as a hero for generations of rational art historians, it is not a question of hiding subjective responses but of "exorcizing" certain elements of the works of art themselves, a process characterized by many "safety measures and reasonable distancings", in order for these works to become intelligible to, and representable in, a proper history of art.[28]

Art historians, in general, are seldom comfortable talking about truth in relation to art. Certainly, we can say that we know for a fact that this building was not erected before 1536 or that the pigment applied to that canvas is mostly burnt umber. If this information is accurate and verifiable, the above statements count as true. Truth statements, however, on this or that aspect of an artwork is not what matters when it comes to the overall, not to say binding, relationship between artworks and truth. In art, truth is something different from what truth means outside it, which may sound like relativism but is, on the contrary, a kind of objectivity. This objectivity is very different, however, from the one patterned on the scientific notion of objectivity, that is "approximately something absolutely true, regardless of any contingency", although this is a more complicated affair than we usually think.[29] Anthony J. Cascardi puts the issue in context:

> Artworks speak concretely, addressing themselves to the senses. They are meaningful but they are, in Hegel's terms, forms of "*embodied* meaning". The difficulty with aesthetic theory is that it has sought to assimilate the truth-content of art to the truth of concepts in their more or less conventional forms, which are disembodied and abstract.[30]

27. Rossholm Lagerlöf 2003, p. 10.
28. Didi-Huberman 2005, pp. xv–xxvi.
29. Daston & Gallison 2007.
30. Cascardi 2010, p. 11. The reference to aesthetic theory could easily be replaced by theory-oriented art history.

I will return to what I refer to as an objectivity of the artwork, unrelated, that is, to projected claims of objectivity from the art-historical discourse, and which is neither held in place nor challenged by subjective responses to the work, but is equal, counter-intuitively, to a kind of subjectivity of the work.[31]

Truth is clearly a third mountain, connected to both the other two. Its most obvious connection is arguably to the mountain of Knowledge, which presumes to reveal and speak the truth about something. In the intellectual, Christian history of the West, truth of course has a religious ring, closely connected to, for example, the vision of a saint. Truth is here almost the opposite of a positivist statement of fact—a miraculous insight, an item, ultimately, of belief, something lived and experienced by someone at some crucial moment, but impossible to verify. The only verification available is the determination of the person involved to witness and speak about the event. Ergo: Truth—capital T—hinges on belief, not just religiously speaking, as we shall see.

A further point on truth, outside art, is its relation to data and facts. Following Timothy Morton, a fact is composed of "two things: data, and an *interpretation* of that data". This flies in the face of the popular perception that facts simply exist, in and of themselves. In fact, there is nothing self-evident about facts; they rely on interpretation.[32] Noticing the raindrops falling on the windowsill, we might surmise that it is raining. Looking up, however, we realize that these drops of water derive from the rain machine of a film set. It is, in fact, *not* raining. We misinterpreted the data for rain.

Data are registered, facts are established. The latter is, again, sure to cause anxiety among many of us: as if there was no certainty, no firm ground beneath our feet, and facts were no more stable than the result of our reasoning, interpretation or guesswork. Facts, however, like miraculous truth visions, rely on belief. We have to believe in facts when established (and not sink into the quagmire of fact resistance); we have to believe in them (in general) to make these efforts to establish them (in particular); and we also have to believe in or trust the process whereby this is accomplished. Facts are not readymade, they are made. Again: data are registered, facts are established. Truths, in science, are claimed. Truths, in art, are rather *acknowledged*, meaning, according to

31. A draft of this idea was first summarized in Karlholm 2017.
32. Morton 2018b, p. 19.

one dictionary: "to accept, admit, or recognize something, or the truth or existence of something."[33]

Art and its truth

In his famous essay on 'The origin of the work of art', Heidegger coins a dynamic concept for truth in art, in the sense of concrete artworks. First, he pronounces that in a work of art, "the truth of what is has set itself to work" and that "[i]n setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth".[34] Setting up is virtually a synonym to framing for Heidegger, which seems to match the conditions of the artwork, elaborated by Grosz in a Deleuzian vein, whereby natural or earthly forces are taken to pervade the work. Heidegger's next step is to propose that what is thus taking place or actively happening in the work as such is—truth.

"In the work, the happening of truth is at work. But what is thus at work, is so *in* the work."[35] Although agency is never addressed, the work of art here seems almost alive. Its forward-leaning happening of truth is also aligned with Heidegger's semantic emphasis of the artwork's working, connected to its reality (*Wirklichkeit*), what it *is* essentially, betraying its ontology. Importantly, truth is thus not exterior but interior to the work itself. The contrast is evident in the efforts of the science profession and art industries, derided by the author in the same essay, to try to establish truth statements on various aspects (literally outside-views) of the work. Here, instead, we encounter something truthful or truth-like from within the work itself. Truth is working itself out—not towards a particular person, recipient or public (it is not a relational game)—but as a condition of the very reality or work-being of the artwork. I suppose we could discuss this element as a kind of essence or even spirit, but as long as truth is not contaminated by exterior epistemological desires to nail down or explain traits of the work, truth will do.

The efforts to make the work of art known to us as individual interlocutors (private or professional) as an *object of* (partial or full) *knowledge* hinges on the work's constitutive passivity. We stand here, in front of or inside the work, and are the ones who look and reflect on what we experience in this process—all according to the established understand-

33. Cambridge Dictionary, "acknowledge". It may seem circular to argue that truths in art amount to recognizing something as true, but if we use some other term for this rich noun, such as accuracy or reality, the circularity is evaded.

34. Heidegger 1975, pp. 38, 45.

35. Heidegger 1975, p. 56.

ing, which I argue is fundamentally mistaken. Certainly, we do all these things, thereby collecting material for writing up and presenting our results in various media and situations, but what we fail to be *seeing* (in the sense of understanding) is that the work in question is active. Although impossible to elaborate on here, the latter resonates with how Aby Warburg perceived the theoretical challenges of art history, in contrast to Panofsky's position.[36]

The work of art is not to be seen as *presented* by the artist, curator or pedagogue (whose oral or textual discourse immediately becomes a *re-presentation* of the work), *it presents itself*, like nature.[37] This is a presencing of the real, according to Heidegger, which is, again, related to work in the following way, at least in our Germanic languages:

> The real [*Wirklichkeit*] is the working, the worked [*Wirkende, Gewirkte*]; that which brings hither and brings forth into presencing, and that which has been brought hither and brought forth. Reality [*Wirklichkeit*] means, then, when thought sufficiently broadly: that which, brought forth hither into presencing, lies before; it means the presencing, consummated in itself, of self-bringing-forth.[38]

This is a bit dense but also vital to grasp the *reality* of the work (*verkets verklighet* in Swedish), a term for which Aristotle used the word *energeia*. What Heidegger keeps repeating regarding the bringing forth, etc., is importantly not an exterior activity, again, but part of what the work as work does (or is capable of doing). This energy, so to speak, is no small thing, since what the real also reveals, or, with the philosopher's special term, unconceals, is—truth: "We translate *aletheia* [unconcealment] by the Latin word *veritas* and by our German word *Wahrheit* [truth]."[39]

A different take on truth is Adorno's, at least when he refrains from equating truth with meaning, philosophy or critique (all exterior), and

36. "Panofsky wanted to define the 'meaning' of images, whereas Warburg sought to grasp their very life (*Leben*), their paradoxical 'survival'. Panofsky wanted *to interpret* the contents and the figurative 'themes' beyond what they expressed, whereas Warburg sought *to understand* the 'expressive value' of images beyond what they meant." Didi-Huberman 2017, p. 325.

37. In some of my earlier work I was drenched in theories of representation and discourse, a position with which I no longer identify. I managed to bypass or ignore the presence and presencing of the work of art, which was nevertheless the centre of my scholarly activities. E.g. Karlholm 2003; 2004.

38. Heidegger 1977, p. 160.

39. Heidegger 1977, p. 164.

instead professes that "the knowledge that is art, has truth, but as something incommensurable with art", whereby he, the philosophical theorist, seems to link art as a concept with "discursive knowledge"—incompatible with art on the level of artworks.[40] Furthermore:

> Art is directed toward truth, it is not immediate truth; to this extent truth is its content. By its relation to truth, art is knowledge; art itself knows truth in that truth emerges through it. As knowledge, however, art is neither discursive nor is its truth the reflection of an object.[41]

To say that art is knowledge begs the question of how to know this knowledge of art. We seem trapped in a circle, necessarily discursive, of shifting senses of our most ingrained vocabulary. To say, as I did above, that truths, in art, are *acknowledged*, may seem doubly vague, by pluralizing truth, contra Heidegger and Adorno, and by lamely using the passive term acknowledgment. Given the vibrant activity of the artwork, however, what else can we say and do? Adding our feelings and judgements to this acknowledgement is optional, but the important thing, arguably, is to receive or "get" the artwork's own truth. This truth is not equal to its meaning, which always has to rely on other comparable meanings, and is always established at a critical distance from the work. Truths are immanent and can only be acknowledged. Meanings, however, are known to be made, thus charted and ranked on a spectrum from meaningful to meaningless.

Now whether truth in action can be identified with Bataille's delirium or existential angst; with Grosz's disruptive affective forces that impregnate the work of art from behind and provide for an enframed world of chaos; or whether truth "emerges through" the artwork, according to Adorno; is seen as a happening or reality at work, as with Heidegger; or the artwork, as Margaretha Thomson puts it in the Thematic Introduction to this volume, can be seen "as a resource of life force": all this will in any case bolster my claim that the artwork is an active phenomenon, not something we are merely responding to in order to make sense of, interpret and create knowledge about. Knowledge creation—interesting phrase—is, indeed, creative, and the apex of this creative process is of

40. Adorno 1997, p. 126.
41. Adorno 1997, p. 282.

course Knowledge itself. Art and Truth are equally phantoms of our creation, as already mentioned, which is why they have intrigued us for so long, and why they may appear so hazy to us when we approach them.

The mountains of our mind and imagination—Art, Knowledge and Truth—have become veiled by a fog. When this is lifted from the mountain of Art, however, we see that it is made of nothing but gravel, or rather grains of sand, as the hopelessly abstract mega-concept Art yields to an almost infinite number of individual works of art. The adjacent mountain of Knowledge is also crumbling under its own weight of absolute (that is, non-relational) scientific veracity, virtually impossible to climb. Confirming that "the unity of knowledge" does exist, Didi-Huberman adds that the reason is that "it is nothing other than the unity of the knowing mind".[42] What does remain of the latter mountain after the fog has lifted is knowledge with a lower-case "k": all sorts of important, indeed indispensable, information on, or accounts concerning the artwork. The third mountain, the mountain of Truth, is still so mist-shrouded that it is difficult to pin down what it stands for: a strange combination of factual knowledge, and its many synonyms, on the one side; a belief-based vision, on the other, something that can only be registered and ac*know*ledged rather than known. This is where a link to the phenomenon of love finally presents itself. The issue is to see whether art(works) may be less something to know than to encounter, even possibly to embrace and to love.

Art and love

To accept the idea, presented here, that an artwork may be understood as a kind of subjectivity or unique individuality, is to short-circuit the idea that our approach towards the work should aim at offering an *interpretation* of it in search of its *meaning*—a process which must adhere to the rational scholarly protocol of ascertaining truth statements about an artwork. The analogue between a work and a person creates a new vision of what artworks are and how we could choose to approach them. The possibly strange idea that artworks deserve to be loved is of course not a necessary requirement for associating with artwork in general, but it goes to the heart of the matter (of truth)—in contradistinction to centuries of art reception, criticism and interpretations, unable, per definition, to reach the basis of unassailable knowledge and thus conclude

42. Didi-Huberman 2005, p. 127.

the attempts.[43] Unless you believe in the possibility and desirability of an end to interpretation, one where we may in unison confirm that we have collectively arrived at the final interpretation of the work in question, interpretations will be a never-ending enterprise—a social game. Of greater scholarly importance would be to establish what a work of art is, and what it does. I am aware that this suggestion circles around an idealized work of art, from the point of view of the person involved in the encountering: that is, a chosen one, picked out from a huge crowd of possible candidates. Works perceived as trivial or boring cannot be approached in the same way. We might here return to the now-jaded question of how artworks (not images as such) would want to be approached. My response would be that they would like us to love them, since only such a deep affectivity corresponds adequately to the (serious/ambitious/advanced/masterful, etc.) work itself. Let me now shift emphasis.

Do I love my wife? I know I do. Do I know my wife? I believe so, but the truth is: I do not know. All I know is that I love her dearly. What, again, has this got to do with anything connected to art? My wife can sometimes be a piece of work, as the Americans say, but nothing close to a work of art. She is a living person, a true individual. There is no one like her in the known universe. She is inimitable, unique and one of a kind (the category of human beings). In this she resembles an artwork, which has all these individual yet generic qualities. Each artwork, even if a duplicate or copy, is unique, as well as an autonomous end in itself, akin to a human being.

Another way to make my point is to announce that each genuine or authentic artwork is real and true. We just have to accept as much, whatever else we may feel inclined to say about its sources or qualities. If we apply this to an artwork held in great esteem by us, or, more colloquially, that we really love, we realize that it comes across as equally inimitable, unique and one of a kind. To compare the merits of this work to other works, not to mention ranking them, would be as vulgar as comparing the merits of my wife to other persons that I know, that I know of, have known or just imagine.

There is no such thing as an epistemology of love. Love is not possible to know, nor to judge, compare, rate or safely confirm for all perpetuity. Love is there, or not, and then it may be gone … There is no response

43. Artworks are also "matters of concern" rather than "matters of fact", to use the vocabulary established by Latour 2007, pp. 87–120.

to the question of why you love something or someone, you just do. Approaching artworks with this sentiment is of course, again, only possible if you really feel attached to them, seduced by them or committed to relating intensively to them, which is, after all, often the case when we make efforts to spend time with them and to enquire deeper and deeper into their character.[44] For all other more academic responses, justified, for example, by the presence of an interesting material, or that no one has yet paid any attention to this artwork, accounts of knowledge will do; no personal commitment is required—you just have a job to do, research to conduct, results to deliver. But if we, again, are going to justify our interest or devotion to the peculiar phenomenon of visual artworks, why we care so much, we could try treating them as individuals, notwithstanding what we perceive as their marks of ageing, quirks or faults. All we know is that we simply love what we see, what we experience and encounter, which testifies to the deepest possible relationship conceivable to the phenomenon at hand.

The word of love is final, at least it has a finality to it, although in human social intercourse it is expected that a performative utterance such as "I love you" will be followed up, sustained, at least for some time, until perhaps this is no longer the case. Exclaiming that I love someone or something (like a painting) inevitably reveals something about me (unless I am lying or play-acting, which reveals something too …), committing me to a bond of sorts.[45] More importantly, however, it *creates* that bond. The professing of love, loud or silent, cannot be undone, at least not easily. This bond is not hermeneutical, however, as if I were proudly announcing that, finally, I am about to produce the most convincing interpretation. Nor is it a bond of knowledge, explanation or expert assessment, degrading the work to an object or material entity. The bond is real, creating a visceral link, an almost physical sense of exchange between the work and yourself. This is where and when the unknowable truth in art presents itself. There is not a lot to say about it. It happens, which we can only acknowledge. Or it does not happen, in which case we are free to continue our research and searches for …

44. Attachment, seduction and commitment could perhaps also be relevant in cases where we are struck by artwork containing difficult, disturbing or horrifying elements or contents, garnering responses from us that we would never dream of characterizing with the word love.

45. I am aware of the increasing inflation of this utterance, which often means nothing more than a strongly emphasized form of liking something or someone, as if it were just a polite phrase.

Art and light

In Susan Sontag's well-known essay 'Against interpretation' from 1966, the very act of interpretation of art is pitched as "the intellect's revenge on art", serving, she argues, to make "art manageable, comfortable". Furthermore: "The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art and, by analogy, our own experience more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*." The essay closes with the suggestion that "[i]n place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."[46] Flippant as this may read, however, as a typical soundbite of the hip sixties, and also somewhat misleading in relation to my argument on art and love since any utterance containing "the love of art" (a possible rephrasing) is overloaded with negative connotations in the long discourse on art in the West, erotics might not be so off the mark.[47] The sadly derogatory not to say contemptuous term "art lover", by the way, has typically been reserved for those "amateurs" (also a sadly devalued word) whose feelings overwhelm their brain and whose lack of education or adequate knowledge is betrayed by their embarrassing confessions to truly love art.

A most interesting word is introduced just ahead of the end of the essay: *transparence* (nowadays often called transparency). The paragraph reads: "Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art and in criticism today. Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are."[48]

When Deleuze saw art as a matter of capturing forces and Adorno spoke of truth emerging through the work of art, these are variants of understanding the work of art as a medium of (relative) transparence. Whereas what we are given to look at when encountering a work of art is its enframed surface or gestalt, its visible planarity—truth, in the sense discussed above—emerges from within the work. Transparence, which is ascribed by Sontag not just some material quality but a value, indeed, the highest value, has a most fraught connection to truth, however. On the one hand, it has earned a bad name in modern cultural discourse since it is associated with the naïve idea of viewers taking things for granted or

46. Sontag 1966, pp. 4–5, 10; italics in original.

47. The reference to erotics must not be confused with anything pornographic, which Sontag rightly characterizes as purely instrumental, thus a veritable antithesis to art.

48. Sontag 1966, p. 9.

simply seeing what immediately appeals to the eye without realizing its conditions of production, its sign status, socially produced value, etc. Yet, and on the other hand, falling in love is known to occur regardless of such knowables, and the luminosity to which Sontag refers is one of the most longstanding metaphors of truth and knowledge in the Western world.

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