

Gorgeousness and gluttony; art, writing, the academy

Megan Rudden

[A row of thirteen adult spider plants with numerous smaller offspring sit along the sit along the windowsill of our studio on the top floor of the building. Whenever I look at them I feel sick. I'm not sure if it's fear or disgust but I don't like that the baby plants are still attached to the big plants, which is strange because I have a very good relationship with my parents]

I said:

When is excess gorgeous and when does it become gluttony?

Like going to the gallery. Sometimes they want all of it, the whole sickening experience. The smell of deep piled carpets, static air, controlled temperature, grand staircases, nauseating in their opulence. To breathe in the luxness of it all. Inhaling iconography, in all its horrible riches and problematic histories. A contained place absolutely not of this world but situated in it, stasis in an otherwise flowing city.

He said:

The stench of death is so alive.

I said:

Or like the books in the academy. Sometimes they want all of it, the whole sickening experience. Every single droplet of saliva dribbled or spat into fluid organisation, bleeding into each other until the page is soaking wet and rapidly disintegrating, you try desperately to grasp a final form, *any* form. Something you can hold on to. Bathing in luxuriously gelatinous waters that threaten to drown you in their complete disregard for your wellbeing. Absolutely self aware with arrogant indifference to any other possible existence. The viscosity of this sea is not conducive to floating.

He said:

But you must admit, it feels incredible on your skin.

I just want you to love me, is that too much too ask?

I said:

It's a different kind of excess. The classical gallery is tradition, whiteness, poor bodies seen by rich men. Books can also be these things but the affluence of language is not to do with money. It might be to do with bodies; how they have tried to separate language from the body and the body from things. When the word is unmade flesh.¹

He said:

Academic custodianship of artistic research can lead to border violations that spark a good deal of tension between art and academia.²

I said:

Like the violation of the patient being made to speak the language of the medical discipline, rather than that of her own body.³

¹ Stupart, Linda '*Virus*' (London: Arcadia Missa Publications, 2016) p.50

² Voegelin, Salomé, '*Writing Sonic Fictions: Literature as a Portal into the Possibility of Art Research*' p.102 <https://docplayer.net/120239722-Artistic-research-and-literature.html> (14.04.20)

³ Voegelin, '*Writing Sonic Fictions: Literature as a Portal into the Possibility of Art Research*' p.102 (14.04.20)

Standing on the edge of your pool, I dip a toe into the water, testing and waiting but each time scalding my skin. I beg you to cool down, but the temperature only seems to be rising, far past boiling point. Your evaporation is spiteful. I would rather drown while on fire than stand here for hours and watch you slowly disappear. I blow on the surface like you are hot tea but your body is infinite and my breath is finite. I'm starting to think this will never work. This infatuation is one sided and I have an inferiority complex.

It might be that language is rooted in the world, the paintings are elsewhere. A reproduction of a perception of reality.⁴

He said:

It has nothing to do with the real and everything to do with the -ity:
-ity. WORD ORIGIN. a suffix used to form abstract nouns expressing state or condition: jollity; civility, [reality].⁵

I said:

A dictionary is of little use here. Traditionally a painting is kind of window onto another world and therefore it is an escape, but it is an optical, cerebral escape. We could consider that sculpture is completely the opposite thing. It is rooted in the world, it absorbs you into the materials and into yourself in the physical world.⁶ It should be noted, however, that this is not necessarily the opposite of escape.

He said:

That doesn't mean they aren't joyful, they just aren't here.

⁴ The idea of being rooted in the world came from misremembering something Karla Black said in an interview about materials, meaning, and mess.

⁵ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/-ity> 15.02.20

⁶ Black, Karla 'Interview: Scottish Artist Karla Black on Materials, Meaning, and Messy Moments' (13.09.12) <https://www.dmagazine.com/arts-entertainment/2012/11/interview-scottish-artist-karla-black-on-materials-meaning-and-messy-moments/> (10.02.20)

A list of paintings that are not rooted in the world;

- Leonardo Da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 1503–19
- Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665
- Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1484–1486
- James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 (the Artist's Mother)*, 1871
- Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss*, 1907–1908
- Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434
- Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*, 1907⁷

He said:

Why are you being so polemic, you're writing an essay not a manifesto?

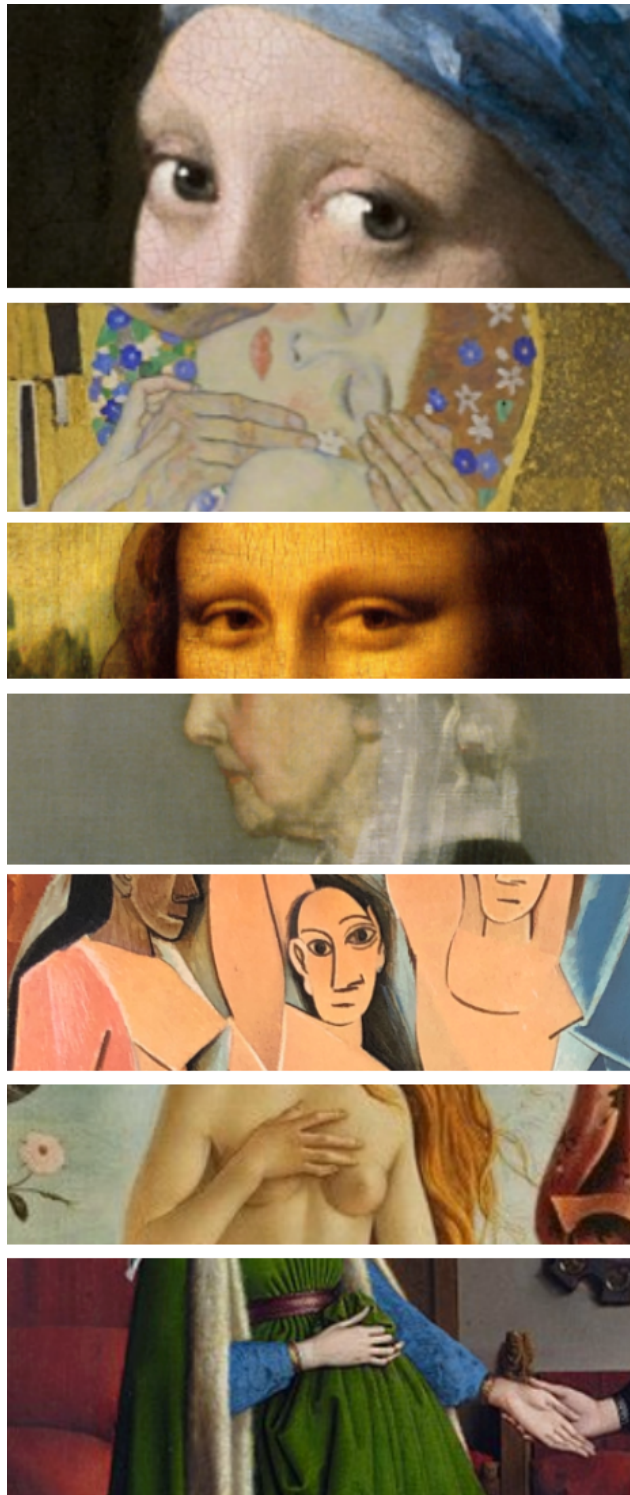
I said:

You wouldn't understand, you don't know how it feels to be looked at without being seen. I think I'm just tired all I do is work but I don't have any money. There will be no miracles here.^{8 9}

⁷ 'The top 10 best paintings of all time' (list given here excludes No.4 Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889, No.8 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1503–1515 and No.9 Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884–1886) <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/art/top-famous-paintings-in-art-history-ranked> (04.03.20)

⁸ In 1996 Hans-Ulrich Obrist dubbed Glasgow's booming art scene 'the Glasgow miracle'

⁹ Coley, Nathan, 'There Will Be No Miracles Here' (2006 Artwork: Electric lights, scaffolding) Currently situated in the grounds of the Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh



Gaze (Johannes, Gustav, Leonardo, James, Pablo, Sandro and Jan)
Digital Collage of images from Google (2020)

That is not to say that all sculpture is rooted in the world, even in the contemporary gallery. Sometimes they want all of it, the whole sickening experience. The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living.¹⁰ Decaying flesh, commissioned killing, fisherman as paid assassin. A tiger shark pickled in sea mocking blue; just make sure it looks big enough to eat you. To bite off a limb and let you bleed dry land, red violence, an open mouth waiting on dinner time (it never comes).¹¹ More decay; we need a new shark. So stretch its skin and try again but it's not enough, it's stale. Replace the shark, start again, it's in the same vitrine.¹² Die a nobel death only to end up in hell; a Las Vegas hotel room.¹³ The ultimate postmodern joke more a duck than a decorated shed.¹⁴ A great perversity of The Art World, to try very hard to make something seem alive when it is dead.

¹⁰ Hirst, Damien, *'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living'* (1991 Artwork: glass, painted steel, silicone, monofilament, shark and formaldehyde solution) Commissioned by Charles Saatchi.

¹¹ In some cases sharks will bite then withdraw while the prey bleeds to death before returning to eat. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190808-why-do-sharks-attack-humans> (20.04.20)

¹² 'Because the shark [used in the 1991 Hirst work] was preserved poorly, it began to deteriorate. In 1993 the gallery gutted the shark and stretched its skin over a fibreglass mould. Hirst commented, 'It didn't look as frightening... You could tell it wasn't real.' When Hirst learned of Saatchi's impending sale of the work to hedge fund billionaire Steven A. Cohen, he offered to replace the shark, funded by Cohen who called the expense 'inconsequential' (the formaldehyde process alone cost around \$100,000). <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/story-damien-hirst-shark/> (20.04.20)

¹³ Another edition of Damien Hirst's formaldehyde shark sculpture can be found in the 'Empathy Suite' at the Palms Casino Resort, Las Vegas, which he designed. The suite spans 9,000 square feet, occupies two storeys and features two massage rooms and numerous artworks by Hirst. The suite costs \$200,000 for a minimum two-night stay, or guests can opt for the full Hirst experience: the \$1 million 'Kaos Theory' package, which buys three nights in the suite. 'This deal includes a 30 litre bottle of Ace of Spades rosé, a 30 litre bottle of Ace of Spades brut, 100 bottles of Dom Pérignon Rose Luminous, 100 bottles of Dom Pérignon Brut Luminous, and 5 bottles of Clase Azul Ultra Magnum' (the world's most exclusive Tequila of which only 100 bottles are made per year, presented in a decanter decorated with platinum, silver and 24-carat-gold, which sell for up to \$7000 individually) <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/damien-hirst-las-vegas-hotel-demon-1507594> (20.04.20)

¹⁴ Brown, Denise Scott and Venturi, Robert, *'Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form'* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001, origin. 1977) referring to the two main types of architecture found on the Las Vegas Strip; Ducks being 'Where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form.' and decorated sheds 'Where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently.'

[Spider plants reproduce asexually by producing smaller plants on 'stolons' branching from buds in the parent plant. These resulting 'plantlets', are genetically identical and will grow to be the same as their parents, provided that they are raised in the same environment.¹⁵ The plantlets will root wherever they touch soil, creating new spider plants. In certain conditions they can grow and spread aggressively.]

He said:

What does it mean to be rooted in the world?

I said:

Art that isn't rooted in the world cannot facilitate a visceral reaction in the viewer, it is detached. The symbol has become more meaningful than the thing itself.¹⁶ It either does not take into account the body or it has been reproduced so many times that it can no longer affect the body, desensitisation through over exposure. A kind of false religiosity which is ultimately dependant upon market value now surrounds original works of art, a substitute for what paintings lost when the camera made them reproducible. The final empty claim for the continuing values of an oligarchic, undemocratic culture. If the image is no longer unique and exclusive, the art object must be made mysteriously so.¹⁷

He said:

Do you always prioritise material experience over language as a way to move through the world?¹⁸

¹⁵ 'The two methods of Reproduction' https://www.biotopics.co.uk/genes1/asexual_and_sexual_reproduction.html (01.02.20)

¹⁶ Holzer, Jenny 'Symbols are more meaningful than the things themselves' remembered from seeing 'Benches (*10 stone benches with quotes from the Truisms and Survival Series*)' in Castle Square, Warsaw

¹⁷ Berger, John '*Ways of Seeing*' (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books 1972) p.23

¹⁸ Black, 'Interview: Scottish Artist Karla Black on Materials, Meaning, and Messy Moments' (13.09.12)

I said:

Your body is not a word, it does not lie or speak truth either. It is only here or not here.¹⁹ Artistic practice, no matter how conceptualised or politicised it may be, is rooted in a sensory understanding of or perspective on reality, or takes sensory perception as point of departure. The term 'experience' implicates this interlacing of intellectual discourse with the sensory world.²⁰

I'm putting it in the gallery not a book. The canon is still loaded it's just guarding a different castle.

He said:

Experience is a problematic component in research because of its philosophical subjectivity, by which we mean that it relates to the individual's personal experience. What is experiential is first-person, and therefore non-transferable to other people.²¹

Have you never listened to a love song with a broken heart?

¹⁹ Atwood, Margaret, *'Power Politics'* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2005, origin. 1971) p.25

²⁰ Wesseling, Janneke, *'Of Sponge, Stone and the Intertwinement with the Here and Now: A Methodology of Artistic Research'* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2016) p.22

²¹ Biggs, Michael and Buchler, Daniela, *'Eight criteria for practice-based research in the creative and cultural industries'* in *'Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education Volume 7'* (Hertfordshire: Intellect Ltd, 2008)

I said:

It is just as problematic, if not more, to insist upon a single objective viewpoint when considering complex social, political and historical factors involved in the production of an artwork. Subjectivity as a research method is transparent in its biases and rhetoric and does not attempt to speak on behalf of all subjects, while being grounded in actual life experience.

Am I using language you understand now? Am I getting through to you? I just want you to take me seriously but I'm not sure how long I can keep this up, it's making me sick.

When is excess gorgeous and when does it become gluttony?

He said:

Minimalism was a movement that took place in the 1960s characterised by a group who distanced themselves from the Abstract Expressionists by removing suggestions of biography from their art or, indeed, metaphors of any kind. This denial of expression coupled with an interest in making objects that avoided the appearance of fine art led to the creation of sleek, geometric works that purposefully and radically eschew conventional aesthetic appeal.²²

²² *'Minimalism'* <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/minimalism/> (13.03.20)

I said:

Any radicality the movement may initially have had was lost the moment
'minimalism' was adopted as the lifestyle aesthetic of the upper middle classes.



Self portrait at my exhibition opening
Photograph, New Glasgow Society (2019)

[The spider plant is also known as the Airplane Plant, supposing that the plantlets look like whirling propellers. The horror is lessened; they are tiny propellers not spawning arachnids. Less flesh.]

I was looking for form but maybe I needed to find narrative, biography, metaphor. So I speak the words out loud. Seducing you with rhythmic movement, controlled intonation, tongue touches teeth as I attempt to compensate for my lack of form on the page. I start to stumble over certain consonants as my lips wrap around each word in hot conflict, compressing syllables in an attempt to transcend my own accent in favour of The Queen's English. The guilt is overwhelming. I should never have let it go this far.



Self portrait speaking the words out loud
Documentation of performance with sculpture, Leith Dockers Club (2019)

He said:

Art and writing are obsessed with subtleties.
If it's too obvious you're not doing it well.

I said:

Unless in irony, then it's genius?!. ²³ ²⁴

²³ The sale of Jeff Koons Rabbit at Christie's auction house in New York for \$80million gave Koons the title of most expensive living artist. Artsy reported on the sale; 'Auctioneer Jussi Pylkkänen opened the bidding at \$40 million. Christie's chairman of global private sales Adrien Meyer hopped in with an offer of \$45 million and deputy chairman of Christie's Asia Xin Li came in at \$55 million before Mnuchin raised his paddle to bid at \$57 million. He traded bids with Li and Meyer before post-war and contemporary art chairman Alex Rotter of Christie's came in at \$70 million. Li countered with \$71 million and then Mnuchin bid, holding off a feisty client on the phone with Rotter. When Mnuchin bid \$80 million, Rotter dropped out, and the hammer came down. (It should be noted the Hockney work that made him the most expensive living artist last November also hammered at \$80 million, but the recent shift in the fee structure at Christie's pushed the final price for the Koons higher.)'

²⁴ Jonathan Jones writing for The Guardian stated that 'Jeff Koons is a mega-artist, rivalled only by Damien Hirst in commercial success and fame' and 'Jeff Koons is a brave and original artist. He insists there is no irony in what he does.' <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jun/30/jeff-koons-exhibition-serpentine> (18.04.20)



Jeff Koons, *Rabbit* (1986). Courtesy of Christie's Images Ltd

I don't need you to give me everything right now. I'm not looking for instant gratification and I wouldn't be here if I was, but please could you just give me something to hold on to, a touch even?

There is still subtlety in being excessive.

He said:

Then what would be the opposite of excess, lack? Utility? Efficiency? You must be economic with writing and eliminate cliché, overuse of metaphors and analogies can prove distracting and may diminish the impact of the point being made.²⁵ Clichés in literature provide vicarious experience for the insensitive with far greater immediacy than serious writing can hope to do.²⁶

I said:

A cliché is not to be despised: its automatic comfort is the happy exteriority of a shared language which knows itself perfectly well to be a contentless but sociable turning outward toward the world.²⁷

This relationship was doomed from the beginning; you want me to be someone I'm not. You are rhetoric, you are discourse, you are the academy. I might hide behind metaphors but at least they're beautiful, at least they're here.

²⁵ '10 Ways to Improve Your Academic Writing' <https://www.proofreadingservices.us/academic-writing/> (14.04.20)

²⁶ Greenberg, Clement, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch' (Massachusetts: Beacon Press 1961) '<http://sites.uci.edu/form/files/2015/01/Greenberg-Clement-Avant-Garde-and-Kitsch-copy.pdf>' (20.04.20) [the word 'kitsch' substituted for 'cliché']

²⁷ Riley, Denise, 'Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect' (Durham: Duke University Press 2005)



Grayson Perry, sketch of two pots for *The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!* (2016) featuring a quote from Guardian art critic Jonathan Jones about Perry's work, name misspelled. Jones replied; 'He really is not an artist at all. No true artist can be so calculating, so stagey, so conscious of playing to the gallery. His incorporation of my criticism is exactly the kind of oh-so-knowing gesture that he offers instead of any true creative fire.'

When is excess gorgeous and when does it become gluttony?

Negative space and blank pages (mean just as much) as excess.

Is this lack? I don't think so.

Staring at the blank page before you, reaching for something in the distance, so close you can almost taste it. ²⁸

²⁸ Bedingfield, Natasha and Brisebois, Danielle and Rodrigues, Wayne '*Unwritten*' (USA: EMI Blackwood Music Inc. and Gator Baby, 2004)

Literature is the glue between words and all that exceeds them, which allows what has already been shaped from within language to partake in what has not yet been told. Our enthusiasm for certain wonderful texts is, in fact, the enthusiasm for the blank, as yet unwritten page, at which our future goals seem to be aimed.²⁹ Writing is never only words on paper but all that puts pressure on it nonetheless, that stays unwritten and yet moulds it, its rhythms and tensions.³⁰

²⁹ Bachmann, Ingeborg, '*Letteratura Come Utopia*' ('*Literature as Utopia*') translation to English by Daniela Cascella from translation in Italian by Vanda Perretta (Adelphi, 1993) of a lecture given by Bachmann in Frankfurt in 1959-60. in '*Artistic Research and Literature*' (Boston: JSTOR, 2019) p. 88 (14.04.20)

³⁰ Cascella, Daniela, '*Something More and Something Else: Language as Excess and Material* [3].' in '*Artistic Research and Literature*' (Boston: JSTOR, 2019) p.88 www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvrk2rm.11. (14.04.20)

[When I thought no one had been in the studio for a few days I watered the spider plants. Sometimes it's important to try to care for things even if you find them repulsive or excessive. It isn't their fault and I don't want them to die. Against bodily impulses, I try to let go and maybe in the caring I might come to know them better.]

Writing is like sculpture. Nothing is two dimensional, it's never just the words and I am never alone. I need to know how it is going to exist in the world *and what you're going to think of it*. Both writing and sculpture pursue form, weight, balance, space, tension, texture, colour even.

Does that mean they are rooted in the world?

The problems arise when we turn to the academy to reflect on these practices. Then, we are caught in the gaze of the academy, the academy's distinctions and limitations. They see practice as a voiceless feminine phenomenon to be seduced or conquered by the academy.³¹

He says:

Isn't it?

³¹ Hjertström Lappalainen, Jonna, "Att reflektera över det som ännu inte sagts," in: Magnus William-Olsson, ed., *Methodos. Konstens kunskap, kunskapens konst*. Stockholm: Ariel litterär kritik, 2014, pp. 65–84: here Nyberg, Fredrik, 'The Writing and the Doing—about Artistic Research through a Writing Practice' in 'Artistic Research and Literature' p.23 <https://docplayer.net/120239722-Artistic-research-and-literature.html> (14.04.20) [word 'theory' substituted for 'academy']

I turn to you, sitting on the end of my bed as my sinking eyes trace the edges of where your body meets the sheets, pushing into rather than sitting on, you were always filled with such tension. The weight of history and criticism and hierarchy and I think; maybe we'll never know each other any more than we do right now.³²

³² Atwood, 'Power Politics' p.14

[A slammed door]

The first time I realised I was in love with her I didn't know if I wanted to be with her or to be her. She was poetry, I was sculpture. She was language, I was form. She is flow, I am difficult. She is dictionary definition, I am synonyms and trying to understand better.

I open the book and indulge my masochistic tendencies. She says; 'I don't care if you don't understand this isn't about you' and I love her for that.

[Notes on this conversation: It didn't happen / if it did, the leaning letters would not be spoken but thought / the academy is a physical place, an embodied institution and a psychological state.]

academy

/ə'kadəmi/

See definitions in:

All

Education

Philosophy

Greek History

noun

1.

a place of study or training in a special field.

"a police academy"

Similar:

educational institution

training establishment

centre of learning

school

college

university

institute

conservatory

conservatoire

2.

a society or institution of distinguished scholars and artists or scientists that aims to promote and maintain standards in its particular field.