THE APPEARANCE OF PAINTING:
PHENOMENOLOGICAL RUMINATIONS

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ABSTRACT

What follows is an account of painting that relies, at least thematically, on certain phenomenological precepts. As such, the thoughts limned herein owe a great debt to the writings of Martin Heidegger - so much so, in fact, that it has been almost impossible for me to locate the object of my inquiry without the insight afforded me by his work.

I make no attempt to account for particular paintings in this thesis, nor do I include reproductions of the work that comprised my Thesis Exhibition. This is by no means an accidental elision. It is my contention that writing does (and is) an altogether a different kind of work than painting, and that its value in relation to painting lies in its particular remove from the visible.

Most of what is written in this thesis, therefore, is an attempt to circle, albeit as tightly as possible, the question *What does it mean to say that a painting appears?*
To Lance and Ted
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CHAPTER 1

IT SHOWS

It is said that being is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts. As such it resists every attempt at definition, for everyone uses it constantly and already understands what he means by it. In this way, that which the ancient philosophers found continually disturbing as something obscure and hidden has taken on a clarity and self-evidence such that if anyone continues to ask about it he is charged with an error of method.¹

Martin Heidegger

I presuppose appearance.

Before the first glimpse, before the first hint of its arrival, I know, or act as though I know the conditions of a particular painting’s appearance (ing). I am before a painting as though the inscrutable workings of my vision conceive its appearance, as though knowledge of what it means to appear inhabits (already) my eyes. Of course, I have no such knowledge - I have instead a vacancy.

Elsewhere I have written that I’ve started to think of painting in less material, medium-oriented terms (as a skin) and now wonder about it as an absence - a without. But the fundamental nature of this withdrawal
seems less specific to the medium paint, and even to the genre of painting (which, as the place of the picture, is the most salient example of the kind of withdrawal that interests me), but belongs instead to the remove of the visible, to the dissolution of objects as appearances. It occurs to me now that I must retouch this statement. I must recall it, and recast it to account for the question of appearances.

What does it mean then to say that a painting appears? Is it useful to think of appearance as something like the figuring of entities - and if we find figures in the world must we also find (or must we first find) faces? Or perhaps appearances designate an absolute perimeter, a barrier that restricts the probing touch of perception with the supple intervention of a mutable skin. If so, is it tenable to argue for the existence of paintings behind their appearances - for paintings which are, at once, both concealed beyond and constitutive of their own visibility? Or, in the final analysis, does the problem of appearances call to mind, as I have already suggested, "a skin without a lining"?

If we take Heidegger seriously, the very nature of a painting’s visibility precludes our understanding of it as concealed beyond and constitutive of within its own appearing. To take this route is to commit a double-error. On the one hand, this way of thinking (past the visible) tells us nothing about a painting that it does not also tell us about a toothbrush, or a lampshade, or a hubcap. To regard the question of a painting’s appearance as one of certain import is to presuppose that a painting distinguishes itself from other things-bearing-aspects, or, more precisely, that our relatedness to a painting (to a painting that we take to be important) is fundamentally a matter of distinction.

On the other hand, having established such a ratio (a thing to its characteristics) we come no closer to an essential understanding of
appearance, and only give sense to the visible in so far as we cause it to imbibe a kind of meter.  

Thinking of the appearance of a painting as the *figuring of an entity* also leaves us vulnerable to error. The most salient instance of this hinges on a particular understanding of how *figuring* corresponds to the visibility of the thing. If we take this figuring to be a calling forth, on the part of consciousness, of our most proximal experience - that of the body - then we are left in the end to account for a presence that institutes *figuring* without first having prior notice. A painting, in other words, is always in the world before it is perceived, and is pre-figured in this sense.

If, however, we do not take this *figuring* to be the creative faculty of a subject making objects in its image - if, instead we understand the figuring of a painting as issuing from an inviolable elsewhere, then what concerns us here is not at all *figuring*, but instead *pre-figuring*. In other words, the question of how a painting appears comes to rest at the lip of the inviolable elsewhere - at the precipice of all appearance.

How, then, do we describe this elsewhere? It is the event of arrival. It is "the lighting clearing of the There" It is, for me, both the occurrence of the painting - the There of the painting - and the absolutely coincidental event of its being viewed. Or, more precisely, it is the cohabitation of a painting and a viewer in the visible. The appearance of a painting is therefore an event of relation - one that is compromised if I consider the painting as merely another object (in which case its visibility withers, ushered from sight by the trenchant demands of the object/subject model). But the relation is also strained if I take the painting to be the sum of its sensible attributes, in which case the painting becomes too proximal, too open to touch, and is lost in the self-concerned recesses of the body.

The gap between too far and too near is the space of extraordinary painting. It is this gap that inaugurates the dissolution of objects as
appearances. It is a place of drifting - a hesitation between concealing proximity and disclosing withdrawal.
CHAPTER 2

IMMANENT ARRIVAL

Rain had been threatening all day. Occasionally the clouds would break, pass overhead, trail off to the horizon. At four o'clock the sunlight slipped past the blinds in the bathroom and was gathered by the water in the toilet bowl (illuminating it from within). The meniscus of its surface was clearly sensible, but not precisely visible. Nor was it hidden. It was delayed. Which is to say that at that moment it had gathered the evidence of existence into itself as it had the sunlight, showing both from the lip of an immanent elsewhere, composing itself before any arrival.

This, he thought, is the world. He had seen it before, but had called it something else - or, perhaps it should be said that he now recalled these things to a different understanding, named them, knew them differently (retouched them?).

In Buncranna, on a bus, in the middle of an afternoon in April, he waited. A man, calling after the bus, was struggling spasmodically with the headboard of a brass bed, and the driver, who was genial to a fault, had gone to offer his assistance. A dozen or so adolescent boys in their school uniforms had just moments before filed off the bus as silently as monks.
But they weren't solemn - they were affecting (or so it seemed to him) a vaguely masculine disinterest.

He remembered that day on the bus as he stood in the bathroom, pondering his toilet. The weather had been very much the same - threatening clouds, brief periods of abatement, peculiar sunlight.

On the floor of the bus one of the boys had left a crumpled piece of note paper. He considered retrieving it, reading it, perhaps fixing it in his journal. The driver, who was by now tugging the headboard up the stairs of the bus with disquieting enthusiasm, had captured his attention - for a moment he was reminded of an ape pulling, without apparent purpose, on the bars of a cage. When he looked down again he saw that a shaft of sunlight had found it's way to the floor of the bus, and the crumpled bit of paper that just seconds before seemed immanently available to him now withdrew (in the light of a wholly inhuman appearance) from the slack embrace of his consideration.
CHAPTER 3

IT TELLS

We will start with very simple definitions, even though they may have to be corrected later. We will call the determination of a closed system, a relatively closed system which includes everything present in the image - sets characters and props - framing. The frame therefore forms a set which has a great number of parts, that is of elements, which themselves form subsets.\footnote{9}

Gilles Deleuze

I have often said that I require abstraction to be specific - to its appearance, to its situation. \footnote{10} It seems to me now that this specificity - the requisite quality that causes me to look to photography and film for source material - is what calls to the body from the recesses of abstraction. It is that which opens itself to be sensed, which makes itself available for interrogation by the body, and which reveals something of the nature of the body’s coincidence with the world.

Put simply, the kind of specificity I require of my marks insures that they carry with them an odor of the extant, thereby making them available, if only obliquely, to the senses. But this in turn begs a further question: how are we to imagine a kind of appearance that makes itself available to something other than the senses? In this regard, some simple definitions of my own are in order.
To begin with, we might ask how we are to understand the odor of the extant? It is, in its usage here, the aspect of appearance that invites the visible to the realm of the familiar. Insofar as the familiar is proximal, it is also lucid and is consumed, accordingly, in its own transparency. The word “is” is familiar, as is the cup on the table. A weather report is familiar, and also the visage we see in the mirror when we brush our teeth. The familiar is that which vanishes into its use—whether this use is fundamentally semiotic, or to do, more precisely, with a task of the body extended in its world is of little distinction here. What is important to the conception of the familiar that I am now advancing is that it implicates, at its most essential level, the daily exchanges between a being and a world.

The other kind of experience that makes itself available to us we shall designate the “abstract”. Our experience here is not untouched by our always-immanent relation to a world, yet the character of our proximity has changed, and so has our relation to the visible.

Deleuze has termed this distinction between the familiar and the abstract as a difference between figure and abstraction. Accordingly, he has stated that “Figure is the sensible form related to sensation; it acts immediately on the nervous system, which is of the flesh. Abstract form, on the other hand is directed to the brain, and acts through the brain closer to the bone.”

Abstract form does not exist apart from the body, but it subsists on duration, and is characterized by being visible and remaining visible, by not vanishing into a subjugating task or register, but by sustaining itself as a contingency within a larger set of things that are.

But the abstract cannot sustain itself, as itself, indefinitely. It is compelled to negotiate, to correspond with the familiar. It is made to take into itself the measure of the world, and to become, therefore, familiar. But in becoming thus familiar, the abstract has not decayed, it has merely drifted,
and returns again to its own reserve, even as the perceiving consciousness attempts to fix it in place.

But the familiar and the formal open again to other sets - the peculiar and the familiar or the particular and the historical - or perhaps it would be appropriate to designate this difference as the painting -itself and the object “painting”.

The first set, the painting-itself, is that which we might in turn designate the in frame. It is literally that which shows itself, demonstrates a presence and occasions our viewing (from within the gap). But it is also that which intimates the other set, the set of possible paintings, of paintings already made but out of sight and therefore out of frame - of paintings not yet made but nevertheless wholly imaginable - of, in other words, the object “painting”. In turn, the object “painting” constitutes the ground against which imaginable paintings are made manifest, and it is this exchange, between the in frame and out of frame (which is, at its heart, the valence of the visible and the imaginable) that calls my work to a mood of narration.

It is the reciprocity between the in frame and out of frame that inaugurates a narrative space within my work, and that distinguishes this space from, but is contiguous with, a painting’s visible, sensible space. It makes of each painting a kind of simultaneous arrival and departure - both within the space of abstract painting, and on the face of particular works. The extent to which a sense of narrative sustains itself within a given work - as opposed to a narrative drift across a body of work - is attributable both to the inward regression of sets and subsets within a painting and to the stuttering of particular marks, which themselves vacillate between possible readings and imaginable sets.

But these perambulations are already giving rise to another question: if, as I have proposed we can speak of the visible, and the not-yet-visible in
painting, how should we regard the utterly nonvisible. In this respect, Deleuze states the following:

In itself, or as such, the out of field already has two qualitatively different aspects: a relative aspect by means of which a closed system refers in space to a set which is not seen, and which can in turn be seen, even if this gives rise to a new unseen set, on to infinity; and an absolute aspect by which the closed system opens onto a duration which is immanent to the whole universe, which is no longer a set and does not belong to the order of the visible... In one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to 'insist' or 'subsist', a more radical elsewhere, outside homogenous space and time.\(^{11}\)

This notion of a "radical elsewhere" is essential to the way \(\text{[symbol]}\) understand my work. At its extreme limits, painting has the capacity to intimate the possibility of an unknowable sublime, of the painting which can never be made and which belongs to an order beyond the visible that nevertheless makes seeing possible, and extends the act of framing into infinite duration.
CHAPTER 4

HARD, HARD PLASTIC

Four inches long, with a one and a half inch diameter - hard, hard plastic. Must weigh about ten or eleven ounces. Except for the patches of discoloration caused by usage (impact?) the cylinder has a sort of café au lait hue - a dull brown ochre with a milky satin sheen.

The dark crosshatching on its skin says something about its flight from the snubby steel barrel - says something about its squibbing path across asphalt and concrete, about its collision with mortar and metal. nothing about flesh and bone.

Its predecessor was a black rubber phallus - five and a half inches from base to tip, but with the same diameter as its plastic progeny. This rubber version was determined, however, to be too punitive, too unforgiving. The tip had a tendency to bend slightly on impact, and then snap back into form, flicking away chunks of living tissue in its wake. In this way it was tearing divots out of faces, which was painful and embarrassing for everyone involved (no one wants to be deformed; no one wants to implicated in an act of deformation).

The cylinder in front of me has never torn human flesh. That capacity, the capacity shared by most ballistic projectiles, has been designed out of this object. Still, it may have thumped someone in the sternum, causing,
perhaps, a cardiac arrest. It may have crushed a cheekbone or scattered teeth across a sidewalk. Or perhaps it merely bruised a shin, or rapped painfully against a knee as its designers had intended.

Of course there is no way to tell. For all I know, it may never have registered against sentient tissue at all. There might be no wound attributable to this object and therefore no pain attributable to a wound.

I imagine for a moment that the hypothetical pain and wound are only incidentally related - that the pain and the wound are completely separate matters. I imagine that the cylinder in front of me contains the pain, and that the wound is only an event - plastic and flesh playing out the drama of collision. In this instance the wound is also a cue for the object to disgorge, or to deliver its ordinance.

If, however, there has been no wound, then this object, never having purged itself, might rupture still. Its cue could come from anywhere. I could cut myself shaving, or opening a can of dog food; I could bang my shin against the bathtub; I could scald my hand on the kettle and release, quite unwittingly, an invisible effluence of agony.
NOTES


2 This passage is excerpted from the unpublished notes of the author. These notes were originally submitted under the provisional title “Fifth Quarter Review Statement” as part of a graduation requirement to the members of the author’s Masters Examination Committee. The names of the committee members can be found on the title page of this document.

3 Ibid.


5 Ibid., p.25

6 Heidegger is careful to point out that this error is not a consequence of the “structure of a simple propositional statement (the combination of subject and predicate)” [*The Origin of the Work of Art*, p.24] - in other words, human thought giving structure to matter.

Appearance precedes thought in so far as thought must first find a thing in order to then act upon it.

7 It may be argued here that, having already made a point of distinguishing painting from other objects, I have led the reader paradoxically back to the *precipice of all appearance*. This is not, however, an inherent contradiction. What distinguishes painting within its own appearance is its peculiar duration - its capacity to be inwrought in its own visibility.
in a way that toothbrushes are, by in large, not. This is not to say that one cannot imagine that an object other than painting might sustain itself in its own appearance, but that understanding a thing as the bearer of its aspects brings us no closer to determining the nature of painting’s peculiar tendency to be and remain visible.


10 Ibid., p.175

11 Ibid., p.178
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