

BEFORE THE WORK OF ART

EDUCATION AS YIELDING TO ART'S ADDRESS

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Abstract

By exploring a number of resonances disclosed by using the language of yielding to the address the work of art issues forth, this essay attempts to show how (self)education is able to take place in conversations with eminent art. Aspects of what happens to us before we (under)stand before the work of art are also examined, suggesting they often impede the conversation we are seeking. Kitsch is also critiqued to set into relief how eminent works of art address us as a welcomed challenge and to demonstrate the

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educations we seek in our engagements with the work of art need to be wary of the ease with which kitsch art is taken into our understanding. This essay claims we have a chance—through yielding to the work of art—of overcoming the seductions of kitsch and what we are likely to have learned before we (under)stand before the work of art.

Keywords: yielding, work of art, education, conversation/understanding, kitsch.

Pred umetniškim delom. Izobraževanje kot predajanje nagovoru umetnosti

Povzetek

308 S premislekom nekaterih pomenskih razsežnosti, kakršne ponuja uporaba govornice predajanja (*yielding*) nagovoru umetniškega dela, skuša esej pokazati, kako lahko (sámo)izobraževanje nastopa znotraj razgovora z eminentno umetnostjo. Avtor tudi raziše poglobitve vidike tega, kaj se dogaja z nami, preden se razumevajoč postavimo pred umetniško delo, vidike, ki pogostokrat ovirajo razgovor, kakršnega iščemo. V skladu s tem zastavi kritiko kiča, da bi pokazal, kako nas eminentne umetnine nagovarjajo kot dobrodošel izziv in kako se mora izobraževanje, ki ga iščemo v naših srečevanjih z umetnostjo, varovati lahkotnosti, s katero umetnost kiča zastira naše razumevanje. Esej zatrjuje, da lahko – s predajanjem umetniškemu delu – premagamo zapeljivost kiča, in razgrinja, česa se lahko naučimo, preden se razumevajoč postavimo pred umetnino.

Ključne besede: predajanje (*yielding*), umetniško delo, izobraževanje, razgovor/razumevanje, kič.

I. Before the painting

“Describing people as the (sole) authors of their own lives
is another way of punishing them.”
Adam Phillips: *Terror and Experts*

It is never quite as easy as it first appears. Although we are always already poised to encounter paintings, which is to say we are constituted ontologically to be ready to receive art's address, much has happened ontically by way of our initiation into a culture ruled by *Gestell* that has made us unready and unprepared for art. Nonetheless, something has brought us to this encounter. It strikes us that something is meant to matter here. Despite being before the artwork, we seem, surprisingly, at a loss to say what it is we are doing here or ready to say what the encounter means. As a result of our bad educations, let's say, we are kept at a distance from the painting even as we stand close to it. The question is how shall we get near to art given what has happened to us preceding our arrival before the work of art?

Few of us are artists by practice and social role. In spite of this, we are all artistic in the sense we are, no less than artists themselves, beings whose having-to-be arises from out of *poiesis* and *aletheia*. In this ontological sense, then, everyone always already belongs to art. In his late essay “Word and Picture,” the essay that summarizes and extends his work on aesthetics, Gadamer says his work in *Truth and Method*, where chapter two makes the sustained argument for the ontological condition of aesthetics and play, requires embracing the lingisticality of all art, including pictures (cf. Gadamer 2007, 196). Thus, hermeneutics, the philosophy fitting to disclosing the wonders of *Sprachlichkeit*, has art and aesthetics at its heart.

To this let's note another touchstone for thinking central to hermeneutics *viz.*, understanding that understanding itself belongs to tradition; consequently, we shall discover our being-together is revealed in the address of the work of art because *Mitsein* is a constitutive feature of being able to understand at all. I depart in this work intending a few words about art and education taking inspiration from the trajectory set by these various hermeneutic claims. I wish to think about painting by way of the address it makes to us so as to suggest painting gives us a way to understand how we might encounter the address of the other.

Furthermore, I shall explore in these brief reflections the idea that what keeps us from seeing paintings well likewise keeps us from being able to welcome the other. That is to say, were we able to learn to allow paintings to converse with us, then this would better our ability to meet the other, whose approach also addresses us. I shall ask if, rather than using the language of openness toward the artwork and the other, we might enhance our understanding by speaking of yielding so as better to encounter paintings and the other. To conclude, I outline a critique of kitsch as a way to set into relief eminent paintings showing the danger of the former and the liberating power of the latter. Without writing directly about them, three eminent paintings watch over my reflections; indeed when taken together a story they tell on my interpretation shapes my entire essay; they are: Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Children*, Turner's *Baying Hound (or Dog After Shipwreck)*, *Le Bonheur de Vivre* by Matisse.¹

II. Yielding to the drawing address of art

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“If I misunderstand art, then I misunderstand myself.
This dual misunderstanding, accordingly, does not bode well for me
nor, worse still, for others.”
Seth Balantine Johnson

Somehow it happens. We find ourselves before a painting. We say we are drawn to this one and not that one. We also say we are not, at least not right now, drawn to any of the scores of others that hang on the walls that round out the scene. The painting has something about it that called to us, summoned us to stand with it, made us want to place ourselves before it. Perhaps we may have crossed continents to be here with it. No doubt, in a vast number of cases, the allure belongs also to the painting's reputation, we are drawn by its title, its creator's name, or by our being instructed by the tradition we ought to see it. Thus, we see from these few observations much that has tutored us before we stand before the painting. All told, there is always more to be understood than we are aware before we get to this place before the painting. The something

1 In a future work I shall employ with respect to these paintings the way of being before the work of art I am advocating here.

showing forth from the work of art that brings us close, its strange summoning, promises something beyond itself (something more than realist claims that the canvas means only to imitate reality or provide mere decoration, for example). The power of attraction issued forth in the showing forth is real; however, we understand it is not irresistible—as observations during any a museum visit will attest.

Educations cannot be given; they can only be allowed. If self-education begins before the work of art, then it is because the address of art draws us out of the habituations of quotidian utility and into the worlding of the world. This drawing is essential to the work of art. We are drawn out of the time of the day-to-day, out of ourselves in our everydayness—thus, out of the ways we are accustomed to making sense of things. By being drawn out of the time of the everyday, there is a chance to be drawn into something else—i.e., into the ongoing meaningfulness—in a manner that makes us aware of it and aware that our being there is the site of this disclosure.

Insofar as art move us this way, we are able to be drawn out by the work of art that is accompanied by a drawing in as well—drawn out as well as being drawn in. All eminent paintings in their address draw us out of ourselves while they also draw us into the world created on the canvas if we are responsive to their summons. We might think of it this way: no matter the subject of a canvas covered in color, line, texture, and form, painting as such is an opportunity for self-understanding; the chance for self-education and the prospect of bettering our relations with other people, is as much a possibility when we are drawn out of our everyday selves and drawn into a conversation. In the clearing so disclosed we might, for example, converse with a Cézanne still-life, a landscape view by El Greco, or a Kandinsky prophetic composition abstract—we do not need to see ourselves by analogy before the painting to be moved—I do not need to see myself as Kahlo's shorn-headed figure to see myself. Most telling here is this, prominent paintings are able to draw us into the world as such, because they draw us into the disclosure of the web of signification where we always already find ourselves in the marvel of understanding itself.

Our age is one, however, that thwarts our access to this self-understanding and furthermore, it blocks our access to this very means to achieve it (i.e., to art). Reflecting on this pervasive way of understanding in our epoch Dennis

Schmidt writes: “[...] a space of understanding our world has been shut down” (2013, 142). This understanding that is closing—and in many ways already all but shut down—leads, according to Schmidt, to “a peculiar and paradoxical distress [that] characterizes our present age, one that is typified by the strange alchemy of an increasing sense of what can be known coupled with a decrease in a sense of what is understood” (2013, 142). To get from mere knowing to true understanding means we move from the passive taking-in of mere information to learning how to yield to the drawing address of art.

312 The radical standing out in the world that defines human being as being-in-the-world is the condition for the possibility of yielding as I attempt to outline it here. An active comportment, which is ready to suffer the address, proceeds being able to tarry or stay with an artwork in a responsive way and describes one essential element of yielding. The work needs us to consummate it, and our yielding before the work of art is required for this to be accomplished. Yielding to the work of art acknowledges the inescapable simultaneity of passivity and activity before the painting. What we encounter is what the work puts into play and we are implicated here because the play of art is, Gadamer tells us, “a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch a glimpse of what we are, what we might be, and what we are about.” (1986, 130) To catch this glimpse requires something of us, a readiness I am calling yielding, a pose that gives itself up to the work’s address, one significant consequence of which is giving up on what has happened before we get to the work of art (what we called metaphorically above our bad educations).

In place of the often-employed language of being open, yielding highlights the specificity of an effort, which remains active and efficacious in particular ways. To be able to meet the painting requires yielding. I am unequal to the painting before yielding to it because we do not meet, in the main, in the same world. Until I yield to the painting, I am all but certain to remain in the world of things understood merely as useful objects. My comportment is likely to be, often by exercising ingrained and well-rewarded habits, a bowing to the mean utility Schiller called the idol of our age (this is a deference that amounts to self-abnegation). In this habitual utilitarian comportment, I am predisposed to ask of each thing I encounter: to what use can I put this object? No one denies paintings can be challenged-forth as objects. Indeed, this is the point:

how we have learned to be is to think ourselves subjects standing over against objects there for our manipulation and use. When they appear summoned by this demand, however, paintings remain paintings in name only. This is how we miss paintings even when we are right next to them, by asking them to be something other than what they are. In a striking difference, yielding brings one into the world of painting on painting's favored terms: *poiesis* and *aletheia*.

Before the painting in the comportment of yielding, in contrast, I become ready to meet to the painting and the world it discloses as a result of foregoing the utilitarian framework and bypassing the presupposition that this utilitarian way of being is superior to all others. This understanding of yielding has a keen sense of surrender and giving up in it from which we ought not shy away but embrace. This surrender is not a loss of agency as such nor does it mark the end of the game. Indeed, the opposite is so, the play of art that frees the meaningful space between viewer and artwork commences with yielding. Yielding abandons the too-willful subject that seeks only objects. What gets surrendered and given up is a desire to control the work from the standpoint of crass calculation. When giving in to the attraction of a drawing address, when giving way to art's proper way of being, when giving up the desire to challenge-forth the artwork, the play of art is set free. These "givings" usher in a readiness for the to-and-fro of conversation fitting to the work of art and the being of the "there" that human being is. We do, however, in yielding, give up certain ways of standing before the painting. Foremost here perhaps are these: yielding prohibits searching for the exclusive meaning of the painting and in the wake of this and equally important, yielding does not attempt to impose an interpretation on the painting readymade.

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As essential as this comportment is, it is not easily achieved. The conversation with an artwork often takes place initially in a too harsh if all too familiar cacophony: "the noisy waves of the constant flow of information," as Gadamer says, need to be overcome (2007, 201). Yielding, then, has a quieting power, which seems necessary because, as Gadamer sees clearly, "much else will be speaking to us along with the statement made by the work of art" (2007, 201). Against what would amount to the loss of art to the chatter of everything around it, yielding lets the painting happen as a painting—it lets the painting accomplish its originating work by allowing its address to be heard. As the

giving way to the space and time created by the work, yielding is what allows the working of the artwork to get to us.

What at first might seem to be too passive a comportment, yielding does not leave us as an empty vessel before the painting to be filled by its meaning. Rather than being a hollowed out passive receptacle, we are required to be made of something such that we are able to meet the painting, to converse with it, to push against it, to question aspects of its address. To wit, without such resistance the conversation we seek would not have a significant part of its required structure. Yielding allows the response to the address of the work of art to come from somewhere vital. Far from being empty and farther still from quitting the field altogether, in the wake of surrendering and giving up, a thoughtful readiness and responsiveness comes to the fore in yielding.

As I noted from the start, art's address is something that can be blocked and warded off by our not being able to yield to it in many ways. We have been systematically made unprepared for art, unprepared to yield to the working of its transformative power, which is to say ultimately its self-educative power.

314 Appearing to us in our unpreparedness, the painting shows itself we might say like a broken hammer—we do not seem able to place this thing among other things in our web of significance. As a result, the question, what do I do with it, receives no immediate answer. Furthermore, the answers that work so well in the world of our interactions wedded to utility fall tragically short of what is required before the work of art. What gets lost here is both a chance at our self-education and the work of art.

In this sense, then, paintings appear to us as something worse, something more broken than the dysfunctional hammer, which we at least think we understand how to repair and then put back to use. The appearance of a painting as something more than broken remains a challenge and a discomfort that makes us want to walk away from even famous and renowned paintings, because we do not know what to do with them when they show themselves as mere objects. Related to this, even when we do not walk away, we too often seek to repair paintings, as it were, by turning to culturally ordained practices of classification. Often, we try to relieve this obliquely felt discomfort by exhausting our time with a painting by merely categorizing it by title, or date, or artist, by style, or movement. This misses, if this is all we do, what stands and

endures in a painting and what self-transformation we might have undergone. Cataloguing a painting by inventorying it, or locating them as if on a modern-day Grand Tour, or the mere record keeping and/or social media “sharing” of famous paintings seen, is the sure way to avoid having to withstand the work of art. Gadamer gives us a vivid image when he writes: “the artwork is not at all an object that one can approach with a measuring tape in one’s hand [...] a real artwork does not allow itself to be grasped by a process of measurement” (2007, 214). Where such means of measurement fail (and fail necessarily), yielding to the work has a chance to succeed.

Contrary to mismeasuring art, yielding participates in showing a way to the simple and subtle happening of painting. Admittedly, it does not hurt having some know-how of the game we are about to play—all the while recognizing that knowing the rules is necessary but not sufficient for the playing of the game. Of course, the game is able to begin with some assistance from the tradition as our initial orientation can benefit from the guidance one is able to receive by considering the categories listed above in addition to knowing a bit about genre, the relation of form/content, line, color, texture, etc., but as a contextualizing means and not an end in itself. As it is in the rule-bound yet not overly restrictive nature of good play, which guides but does act as mere mechanization, one follows the embodied fluidity of a conversation with an artwork the way one participates in the unfolding of an ever-evolving game. That ecstatic rush of being a committed participant who is neither leader nor led—or perhaps both at once or maybe it is each in turn—characterizes the play yielding sets free before the painting. Play, when understood well, shows to us our constant condition *viz.*, we are both (rule-)bound and free. This is a keen understanding of finitude in its hermeneutic truth. In a fashion resembling a good game, eminent art is inexhaustible. This eminence is due to the artwork always being able to stand-out from among the leveling of the everyday and the chance of we with it.

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If we learn from yielding something about being drawn, about play, and about twisting away from our habitual ways of understanding, then, in the English phrase “I yield the floor” we find another way to think what the word *yield* is able to disclose. This phrase is invoked in formal deliberations, for instance, to say that I have made a response and now stand ready for the response it may engender. Yielding the floor says I am finished with this turn

in the back-and-forth of a conversation that means to take us somewhere together (where even the phrase back-and-forth might be too restrictive). Before a painting, yielding the floor says although I am not speaking now, I am listening intently. Listening well to the response made by painting's constant address to what we have brought to it is an essential part of our responding. A response that does not yield in this way does not live up to being a genuine response. By yielding a space and time opened between artwork and viewer, and listening intently is a component of a genuine response *sine qua non*.

316 In closing this sketch, one last appeal to yet another sense of the word *yield* stands to further the understanding of what can happen before a painting. If *yield* as a verb has led us to see the fecundity of the to-and-fro between viewer and artwork, then we might ask what is created by the encounter. Here the noun *yield* is telling. As a sort of gathering that comes from the bringing-forth and letting come-forth from out of a cultivated conversation, yield names what I hesitate to call the outgrowth of our interaction. If permitted a playful turn of phrase, I would say: the yield of our yielding is what we and the painting become after our conversational stay before the work of art.² Withstanding the address of art opens a space of meaning between the viewer and the work of art and the yield is created there in that in-between, in the now fecund space opened by the act of yielding.

III. The tyrannical nature of kitsch: setting eminent art and ourselves into relief

“If the artwork is genuine [...],
it does not install itself peacefully into the world
but rather reorganizes it and puts it into question.”

Gianni Vattimo: *Art's Claim to Truth*

It is not pretty to demand that someone else like this or that—say Picasso over Matisse or the other way around, or Duchamp rather than either, Turner over Constable, Kahlo rather than O’Keefe, or Delacroix to Goya—yet, it

2 NB: this is not the adventure of going outside oneself and collecting “booty” with which one then returns to a subjective interiority, as Heidegger first critiques in *Being and Time* and from then ever onward.

seems forgivable, if not imperative, to demand we ought not like some things, and kitsch names those some things we ought not like and for which it would be dangerous to everyone were anyone to do so. A hermeneutic stance that means to be anti-hermeneutic in its very execution describes the essence of kitsch. Or said otherwise, kitsch is the violent cutting short of interpretation. Kitsch is the production of art so easily taken in one forgets one is undertaking an interpretation. At one and the same time kitsch is both the supposed object of interpretation and the interpretation itself. Kitsch leaves us nothing to do but be deceived, robbed, and from the standpoint of our active role in interpretation, forsaken. In “The Relevance of the Beautiful” Gadamer puts it more kindly saying in the encounter with kitsch all we see and experience is “a feeble confirmation of the familiar” (1986, 52).

If all interpretation is both patient and agent as the consideration of yielding has shown, then kitsch is understood as nearly wholly the former for the reason that its function is to strangle near-to-death our participation in suffering the work of art. The work that matters most, i.e., engaged and active interpretation, has already been undertaken for us in the kitsch artwork. Part of its active deception, which it wins by making us passive by its very design and execution, is that kitsch means to give this meaning to us as a gift. However, it is a gift that diminishes. Kitsch is a dangerous confidence game; its supposed giving takes away what art is meant to accomplish, and in its ruse absconds with our responsibility to interpret. As part of its cover, it furthers its deception by making us think in its aftermath that we have confronted a work of art. It matters not where along the political spectrum kitsch art arises, this bad art always has something tyrannical about it, even if, in seeming innocence, it drips in sweetness. Gadamer allows that kitsch can be well intentioned; although he does add, nonetheless, that in every instance “kitsch means the death of art” (1986, 52). I understand this loss to be a missed opportunity for education as well as the wounding of our ability to welcome the other. It tells us all encounters with something other should be this easy.

As we all understand, small things add up and the seemingly singular insignificance of some harmless piece of bad art turns deadly significant when

are forced to confront it continuously and *en masse*.³ As Gadamer says, kitsch art has designs on you, it means to deceive in just this way. In as much as an eminent work of art means to address us and may even intend from conception through to execution and display to move us, it does not have this cheap design on us. It addresses us with a sophisticated outgrowth in view. It desires we end up beyond ourselves without knowing beforehand where this is going to be exactly. This is every piece of great art's way of saying: "You must change your life."

This repetition and constant presence are but one danger of kitsch. It has other strategies as well. For those, like myself, who do not paint nor draw, who do not have nor have developed any talent in drawing and painting, in the face of certain kitsch paintings are forced to admit these works are more than we could accomplish. This is to say, a certain technical skill, indeed even a vast amount of such, is no guard against a work being kitsch. To the contrary, such skill—one that shames those who would could not produce such realism, detail, and composition—is one of kitsch's most dangerous disguises—a ruse with dire consequences for our self-understanding. Many who embody an
318 inability with a brush ask with sincerity: "How could such a show of skill be bad?" Technically accomplished, to be sure, yet it is bad all the same because, as Gadamer contends, such kitsch art "manipulates us for a particular purpose" (1986, 52).

In the wake of such experiences, the reverence we need before art wanes—a reverence we need to stay within to achieve the solidarity of an ethical being-with. The promotion of kitsch—of bad art as art—renders unwelcomed the extravagant claims made for the power of art to transform us. No such claims could be seriously entertained by anyone for whom kitsch is what is understood by art. Easy art, another name for kitsch, leaves us untransformed and something worse: it leaves us by way of its manipulations less likely to think ourselves in need of transformation. It is as if kitsch says: "Don't give any thought to changing your life." This critique of kitsch allows me a way forward to my conclusion from what will appear at first blush as a contradiction.

3 Is it enough to say all around Puerta del Sol in Madrid there are for sale salt and pepper shakers in the form of characters from Picasso's *Guernica* to see what damage kitsch is able to accomplish?

IV. The decay of lying in a world of constant lying

Viewer before a Matisse portrait: "I have never seen a woman who looks like that."

Matisse: "Madam, that is not a woman, it is a picture."

(An anecdote)

The provocation sounds something such as this: great artists lie and we are the better for it, perhaps we only are as good as we shall ever become because of this. Yet, this is also true: scoundrels lie and do so in their own despicable way. The great and essential difference here is this: where the former leave conversations to be savored which are almost too beautiful to believe—the latter, with their ugly lies, do nothing but steal. Furthermore, they intend this robbery from the start. This theft—and it has its parallels in other realms of culture—is due to the private appropriation of the profits of deceit.

On the other hand, the lies of great artists are meant to be the giving and bringing-forth of a genuine truth against such scandalous larceny. Here we have it on the word of Nietzsche or Picasso, Oscar Wilde or William Morris, Heidegger or Gadamer, *viz.*, there is, by way of eminent art, a proper way to lie—the lying that is decaying to cite Wilde's famous essay. As we know, each of the passages we might adduce here says (from the above thinkers and more besides) something akin to this: art is the lie that tells the truth and discloses our having to yield to and remain in the truth of disclosure for art and we with it to be what each is. As we have just seen above, kitsch does not lie in this manner, it rather means to deceive and obscure our interpretive constitution while it compromises our ability to be responsible to others.

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Echoing insights from Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (which have motivated my hermeneutic work over the past many years), Schmidt declares Gadamer's aesthetics commits our thinking and teaching about our ethical being-in-the-world to be grounded in an understanding of the work of art. Gadamer's hermeneutics (and he is nowhere near alone in this) helps us understand we need art precisely because of how catastrophic things are today. The more debased things become, the uglier, the more indecent, the more pressing the need for (fine?) art. As Schmidt puts it, we need to see "the promise of the work of art because of, not despite, the desperate character of

our time” (2013, 143). Granted, the guideposts to our way to a sophisticated understating of collective being-with-one-another might be found other places where people seek intimations of transcendence (nature and religion, for example), yet they are especially prominent within the work of art.

In a time destined by calculation, pure administration, not to mention the daily spreading of falsehoods, it seems more than strange to turn to art. Yet, we turn to art because we need imagination to understand who we are. In coming back to art, in cultivating our imaginations, we shall come back to ourselves and in this we shall ready ourselves to go out and welcome the other. Paintings as works of art do the work of art by embodying a futurity that sets into relief our interpretive finitude. When acknowledged, this realization of finitude before the transcendence of art discloses to us that we stand here with many other viewers, even in a near-empty museum. I stand before this painting where others stood before me, where my contemporaries will soon also stand, and where another interpreter will yield to the address before this painting in a time when the possibility of my doing so will no longer be a possibility of mine.

320 Works of art belong to the historical moment of their creation as creations, and not as objects, which means they also belong to that moment by transcending it. This being lightly yet forever tethered to that moment allows them to come to us powerfully—filled with new possibilities. In their transcendence, they come to us alive and not as dead pieces of the past. They are, in Schmidt’s fine phrase, quick rather than dead.

The pull to do something now, the command to be politically pragmatic and realist, the demand to execute some plan, will be great. Of course, who would deny it? In view of this, it will take courage and a no little amount of faith to yield, to stay, and to tarry awhile before the work of art. In those moments when we are able to yield to it, art is always ready to undertake the work of art, ready to issue its address, and ready to be a tutor in our self-education, which means as well being the tutor of our being-with. Art’s education will lead us to see we shall, before the other as before the artwork, seek to understand rather than pretend our knowing could exhaust the meaning of either a person or a painting.

Art’s irreplaceable way of being ever ready to our yielding is evidenced by our being able to learn anew before a painting we love and before which we

may have stood many times previously. We see its power in its difference from, say, an empirical study that we have once read. We only reread such a study because we have forgotten something or need to confirm what we think we already know, to check the data one more time. Little, if anything, will have changed and we return to empirical studies to “make sure,” as we say.

The ever-shinning beauty of the work of art to which we desire to return and stand before has nothing of this forgetting about it. To the contrary, we remember quite well what the work did to us before in our previous with-standings, we recall how different we were after our encounter. Seen in this light, what we desire from art is not what it was before, rather our desire is for what is new in it this time. In this newness we are renewed. We understand a great painting has in its address something unique to offer to our self-education, something no number of visits could impoverish. Before the work of art our yielding asks the work to do yet again what it will never have done quite this way before.

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