

Research Commentary

The Artful Recollection of the Self

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Accepted 6 March, 2013

This article explores how we remember ourselves through the use of aesthetic objects. The transformation of a work of art into a working part of our own personal lives is documented through such exhibitions as bodyworlds, private museums, *memento mori*, and out-takes from interviews given by persons who had transformative or evolutionary childhood experiences within the arts. A phenomenological perspective reveals that we project our biographies into the realm of imagined being by virtue of the aesthetic encounter.

Key words: phenomenology, aesthetics, memory, biography, historicity, hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION

"Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost." (Bachelard, 1964).

'Look for me in the next exhibit!' (Comment in guestbook at the BodyWorlds 1 exhibit, Edmonton, Canada, 2009).

To surprise ourselves we must be surprised by what already is our self. To take ourselves aback, we must take back what is already ours. In short, we must 'return to ourselves from having been otherwise,' as Hegel famously notes. But it is not so much that we have returned to what we have been. We have of course changed in the meantime. This is the 'otherwise,' but it is not something other than what we are becoming. It is otherwise than what we have been before, and this prodigality is the character of ongoingness in the world: "For only the fact that an earlier phase preceded this Now and Thus makes the Now to be Thus, and that earlier phase which constitutes the Now is given to me in this Now in the mode of remembrance." (Schutz, 1967). The eventuality of any stream of events is the stuff of all cultural temporalities. We come to know this flux as historicity, both the inertia of history which is not our own, and the history in which we live and rewrite whilst making it our own. The preservation of the self is the manner in which memory manifests history as lived time. Its transience allows for as much opportunity as loss, as we need to forget part of ourselves and what we may have

lived through to move on with the project of living: "The awareness of the experience in the pure stream of duration is changed at every moment into *remembered* having-just-been-thus; it is the remembering which lifts the experience out of the irreversible stream of duration and thus modifies the awareness, making it a remembrance." (ibid. italics the text's). It is not that we stop the motion of life in order to arrest some part of it which we miss or have in part forgotten. We do indeed forget what much has meant to us at the time it occurred, but this is because we ourselves have changed, and what can become meaningful for us in a similar manner has thus changed. Meaning is also part of the Now and the Thus, and though it sediments within our consciousness, the flow of liquid time erodes its stratigraphy, jumbles its lines and shapes its contours. The sands of meaning are carried away, giving us the impression that they are themselves the vehicles of time. But what remains, the bluffs that tower above the aged river of our being, is where in fact the time of our lives rests. What fossils might be buried there?

If there is an art to remembrance just as there seems to be a skill to recall and rhetoric to the recollection, especially through narrative, of events now becomes story or even myth, then there must be a place for art itself within the memorial process. If we recollect collecting our thoughts about what we have been and what it has meant to us, in gazing up at the slopes of sedimented but now incomplete memory, we recognize ourselves through the imagery of what it is to need ourselves to be in the present. We need, in other words,

a usable past, and not one which merely recollects or has the status only of myth. Art is one of the perennial markers of memory, difficult to erode by one's own consciousness alone, as it also marks, as we have seen, a culture memory greater than ourselves. It does not pander easily to our individuality, in spite of the great efforts to make it reflect without distortion what we wish it to in self-projection: "On the contrary, it is characteristic of art that what is represented, whether it is rich or poor in communications or has none whatsoever, calls us to dwell upon it and give our assent in an act of recognition." (Gadamer 1986). Note that we do not entirely agree with its presence in our past, as we can only assent, and not *consent* to its being there. Its being is irruptive in the sense that it is also very much not part of our past, and has become ensconced, descended, and half-buried in our consciousness. And it is the part which cannot be at first seen and recognized that has the greater influence. This is a good thing, due to the influence, also greater than ourselves, of the mode of life within which we struggle to remember a past of our own at all: "We shall have to acknowledge that learning to listen means rising above the universal leveling process in which we cease to notice anything a process encouraged by a civilization that dispenses increasingly powerful stimuli." (ibid.). Ours is hardly the only river that courses its being through the world landscape. There is a great flood of modern culture, driven by incessant rains of institutional hegemony and corresponding media within which our own streams of consciousness have to swim. The exercise in self-preservation, the first step to understanding the function of art as the vehicle for self-remembrance, concerns itself with not only making the distinction between what is my past and what is the past of others and of history as an object, but as well the more intimately discerning task of recalling the actuality of things to ourselves, rather than the whitewash of a time-being that caters to the convenience of biographical history, the 'that was then, this is now' variety of memory that forgives itself rather than more radically forgetting itself. It is this latter movement which is more authentic, for in forgetting we know by what we can no longer know that we have indeed become another person, and not merely someone who has 'moved on,' or 'gets on with their life.' If we must 'die many times in order to become immortal,' then one of the major ways of confronting this serial suicide of selves is through the use of art. The perenniality of meaningfulness found in works of art subsists through the plenitude of ever-changing meaning this or that history can take from it. Through this transmigration of meaning, art resists erosion. It is never 'of its time' and only of its time. Art remains as part of the sediment of all histories as part of what is now our time, and we must encounter it within that framework.

Yet there are severe obstacles to preservation. The transience especially magnified in modern times, of one's residence, relationships, place of work, and even

kinship ties amongst members of increasingly smaller families, all play their part in the fragmentedness of auto-memory. We may begin to transpose our ideal life where we would rather be or what we would rather be doing into a parallel series of phantasms, running along beside us like a second shadow. Indeed, dreams proper may often seem to inhabit the landscape of a second life, desired or feared: "Such dreams unsettle our daydreaming and we reach a point where we begin to doubt that we have ever lived where we lived. Our past is situated elsewhere, and both time and place are impregnated with a sense of unreality. It is as though we sojourned in limits of being." (Bachelard, 1964). And yet the very endurance of what is both eroded and fragmented attests to more than the influence of inevitable time and change. It also maintains its presence through re-occurring to us as we recur to ourselves. This mourning heralds the next morning. We may mourn the loss of the previous day or life of days, but this regret impels us to the expectation that we as well as our days can be replaced with others, by others. We are thus made persistent in the face of change and dynamic in relation to that which is akin to the undead in us and within the wider world of art. These works "... carry with them in their practice the taint of a nonliving past that they do not quite overcome. In modernist art, death does not appear as the prehistory of the significance that will be unveiled in its wake; it simply persists." (Horowitz 2001). The simplicity of this presence is the plainest marker of what has passed but also what can never quite be the past. We are aware that what has passed before us we have both witnessed this passing and also we have been preceded by it can be a source of sorrow. We have missed it, on the one hand in the sense that it occurred before our time and this also includes the sense that we were not what we needed to be, although alive and sentient, 'at the right place at the right time' and on the other hand we regret its current non-presence, like the lost loves of our more youthful selves, very often guises for that very youth we have also lost in the process.

But that this is no different for living on in general, poses the gravest potential limit on the role of art as the vehicle for memorialization. Art must first undergo with us the therapy of recovery. Just as we have assembled the works relevant to which we think we might rather be in projection, memorialization uses these works to navigate and chart the history of our being in the world as we have been. This cartographic re-ontology is often undertaken with trepidation: "There is [] an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every experience. Otherwise, there would be no taking in of what preceded.

For 'taking in' in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful." (Dewey 1980:41 [1934]). We do not simply replace experiences with others. We never merely replace a memory with another. Memories are not

therefore simple surrogates for one another. They persist in a manner that does the marker. They are also not only archived as a casually catalogued mass of detritus that subsists beneath the flow of contemporary experience. They become rather part of who we are, indeed, so much so that they are often themselves the cause of our desire for self-overcoming.ⁱ They qualify our being in almost a linguistic sense: "... I should like to point out the power that an adjective acquires, as soon as it is applied to life. A gloomy life, or a gloomy person, marks an entire universe with more than just a pervading coloration. Even things become crystallizations of sadness, regret or nostalgia." (Bachelard, 1964). The dynamic tension extant between the presence of what 'simply persists' within us as our own subjectitude which the art of our times both represents and represences can be described as the ongoing taltalus of a now-knowing being who once did not know. The perfection of hindsight is also part of this mythic rationalization, as we cannot necessarily assume that with distance and perspective we see as clearly as the usual analogy implies. What we do is see differently, and we will see differently again. We rewrite the autohagiographic novel of ourselves in novel ways: "We too, tied down within the same narrow limits, create our own myths, our own style, with greater or lesser relief and authority." (Focillon, 1989). This limitation opens us to the homologous process of artistic creation. We must live on as a character in our own story, but we are not predestined to be only an archetype or a metaphor, as with many literary characters.ⁱⁱ If we are 'actors of our own ideals,' as Nietzsche famously notes, then these ideals are set within the tapestries of cultural *eidōs* and it is their simple threads which persist in the textile of human history: "And so also the artist must proceed with his prosaic novel. Reduced to a police dossier or to a paragraph in a dictionary, how commonplace do the facts seem." (ibid.). Part of the 'undergoing' which is also an undertaking we bear the corpse of our fragmented memories to the place where they will be simply marked and will thus persist as a collection, not unlike the use of our personal museums of art works in the mode of their being memento mori is admitting to ourselves that this is what we have up until now been. The variety of works of art also bears sometimes mute witness to this avowal: "Thus, the different expressions bear their content in different ways, and this difference is just that between confession and art." (Horowitz, 2001).

We cannot let the marker become a monument to the morbid and brooding contemplation of only that which has passed. Instead, self-preservation demands that we take its sign as an exhortation to continued life, even if only to increase the gradually ascending surplus of lost meaning. We cannot understand what is marked as a source of ongoingness, as the being in which what is to be is always present as its self-fulfilling prophecy. If we succumb to this effect of the grave, then "... the uniqueness of the original now lies in its being *the original*

of a reproduction. It is no longer what its image shows that strikes one as unique; its first meaning is no longer to be found in what it says, but in what it is." (Berger, 1972). The persistence of this kind of destiny, that which 'simply persists' and does no more than its mere presence denotes either for ourselves or for itself, commits all human beings who follow in the wake of the dead to be mere reproductions of ancestral, perhaps even apical, originals. Our value then is measured only by our precise and present mimicry of what has gone before us. Rather, the marker, if used as an exhortation to new life and re-created destiny all of a sudden and once again becomes dynamic. It marks time in a new way, at the very least as metronomic rather than merely nomic, the latter simply marking time by giving it the names of the dead.ⁱⁱⁱ

Materials and Methods

The tableaux of dead selves

The famous and startling series of exhibitions called 'BodyWorlds' is a serious attempt at making the dead, not come back to life, but to give their lives in the service of an enhanced understanding of our own, the still living yet still to be dead. The technique of plastination, where the most minute structures of organic anatomy can be preserved in their 'as-if vivisected' form, allows the living to look inside of themselves in an unprecedented manner. One expects the grotesque, even the abominable, but what one sees is the sheer elegance of the systems by which we as organic and conscious beings exist, subsist, and indeed, of what we consist. The mirror has been inverted, the projection now an introjection, the subject a quasi-object anew. Self-preservation has reached a technical height that overcomes the egotistical nomenclature so potently resonant in any attempt of vision of a kind of immortality this frozen version of what was life can go on forever and even become personal, hence the oddly humorous comment in the epigraph only because such exhibitions use the remains of life to teach us the value of what remains alive. Diseases of all kinds are documented, most especially the cancers of 'lifestyle,' or the overwrought organs of hyperextension and stress. There is an intense caveat, almost religious, that life is sacred, and these altered and meta-preserved versions of our bodies are the pseudo-living testament to the effects of what is harmful to life. It is striking that the bodies donated to this scientific and pedagogic cause come from those who have succumbed before their time. A reconstructed vehicle accident victim here, a lung cancer athlete there, the paroxysm of stillbirth still further inside the hallowed gallery of ourselves suddenly vivisected and exhibited. Everything is in order down to the final capillary, the most occluded nerve. The technique approaches a perfection which one used to only associate

with the scandalously sciatic brilliance of the artist.^{iv} It overcomes the loss of the golden age, where in myth we humans consorted with the gods, and in fact we lived intimately with one another in communities which were of a single mind: "Today we look back upon those times with nostalgia, the hysterical nostalgia, doomed from the start to remain unsatisfied, of sophisticated men. We look back with impotent nostalgia upon a time when one did not have to be a genius in order to approach perfection ..." (Lukacs, 1974). Yet *BodyWorlds* is as much art as it is science, the figures radically sculpted by the post-modern scalpel. There is precedent, of course, for this kind of art, most notably by Watteau, whose museum in Paris is a veritable orgy of grotesquerie simply because the figures are *only* art and not as intently both lessons in basic if detailed anatomy and more importantly, in the ethics of having one's own body and keeping it within the concise and ritual lines of a Greek temple. But we live in a time where art also has the function of education. This has been so since the political works of the French revolution, and perhaps before, though the further recedent we travel the more we are impressed by the rewriting of history for propaganda or entertainment purposes than with those pedagogical Shakespeare's political histories of England and the Classical period come easily to mind here. Artistic license can slide into licentiousness. We cannot be completely smug about our own situation, however, as "Every work of art imposes its own temporality upon us, not only the transitory arts of language, music and dance. When considering the static arts, we should remember that we also construct and read pictures, which we also have to enter into and explore the forms of architecture. These too are temporal processes." (Gadamer, 1986). What *BodyWorlds* accomplishes is literally the lifetime of our beings, strung out in the lace of our entrails, the gut-strings that play the music of the organism, the clockworks that mark the meter and rhythm of life as we know it. For all time, due to technique, we are confronted with the mastery of our bodies. It is, no doubt, a finite and fragile mastery, complex and highly evolved, but as to what we can compare it with when we consider its complexity and its plane of evolution, we are still ignorant. All we can do is note with both fascination and sobriety that we too are exactly as these figures are, only in movement and flux, where the ingenious sculpture and posing of our bodies apart and in parts gives us only the illusion of perpetual motion.

This is not the only space where an attempt is made through auto-autistry to make what is actually life, or the 'un-life' of the plastinated dead, into a form of art. One is perhaps aptly reminded of the gargantuan rallies of the Third Reich where politics is hypostasized into a greater sociality, or the use of skilled design in advertising, and there are other diverse examples. But where there is an authentic extension of being, there is not just its extension, but its transformation for its own sake. Art has

the effect of a renewed childhood, in that it is during this time of our lives more than any other that we are both amenable to change and to flight of fancy, but also that we are ourselves changing and are changed by the on-rush of socialization and learning: "It is on the plane of the daydream and not that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us. Through this permanent childhood, we maintain the poetry of the past." (Bachelard, 1964).

The act of memorializing can be thought of as kindred to the artistic act. It certainly attempts to mimic the process of the creation of a work of art by its seemingly sacred intent and its tropic resonance with the theme of immortality. Self-preservation is not in itself an egotistical venture. Rather, it defines a fundamental aspect of the human character by reminding us that we ultimately cannot have any final and certain expectations of such a process. Of course we are disconcerted by this fact, but it does not dissuade us from the experimental use of preservatives of all kinds. When we notice something of ourselves that either brings pleasure, the esteem of others, or social status within institutions, we would like it to carry on. But the use of art as a preservative or conserving measure responds to existential questions that are neither ad hoc nor are solely oriented to social structures. It instead attempts to address the tension we feel between what we can do and what we cannot, what we think we know about ourselves and what we merely suspect: "Humanity is never totally transparent to itself or reconciled to itself. Men are continually blind to some aspect of man. History is the history of the dramas which arise from this ignorance. As a result, history is like a reproachful presence." (Dufrenne, 1973). If we are upbraided by a history that we only partially understand and yet more partially participate in, then art reappears as an aspect of the lifeworld which seems to overcome the judgement of such a history. It appears always in its essential state, and resists, sometimes uncannily, but more often through the sheer perennality of its human themes seemingly the more so within societies with written languages the vicissitudinal flux and vestigial presence of the past. This is not something, it appears, that we as humans can ultimately accomplish, though we must treat it not merely as a fact but as a challenge. That we do so is both the source of art and the memory that art exists and continues to exist: "Finitude is our lot and yet also our responsibility. Although there is always something left for us to understand, it seems that we also always possess the means to do so. Consequently, affective categories are still within us, even when we make no use of them. Thus if we are blind to the aesthetic object or if our taste is relative, this is no one's fault but our own." (ibid.). Perhaps the weakness lies most where we lie to ourselves about what is worth preserving, and our own abilities to make use of an art of preservation that preserves that which in the self makes us more than just self-interested.

RESULTS

Our reactions to the new community of aesthetic ancestors

If we need to avoid casting ourselves in the bronze of an enduring but static and idealized archaeological object, imbued with the status of a statue but endowed with nothing more than a catalogue number, we need to confront the problem that "Art is now perpetuated by the effort to introject its own past which is to say by a mimesis of death." (Horowitz, 2001). All memorialization consorts with what is previous to us, and that includes what is dead within and without us. The dead live on within us, yes, but also have lived without us 'before,' as it were. Given that we must adorn the living world with a sometimes sanctimonious harmonic in which the dead can once again find a voice not their own, but one that speaks a tongue we can understand then "... for the sake of the experience that suffers from an inability to be represented and so stands in a traumatic relation to representation, art carries with the dead." (ibid.). The art of our modern society could be seen as simply reflecting our own preoccupation with the new sense that we may yet, through evolutionary technology, overcome all 'natural human' death. However this may be, given the rush of invention in genetics and cybernetics, and the sense that a new species will have to be adaptive to a new and perhaps degraded environment, it is clear that we adore, even covet, that which our past has created for itself to communicate with us, and not just in order to continue the conversation of humankind.

More than this, as with very early memories which merge with both dreams and phantasms, the imagination reworks what had 'actually' occurred some time ago, and often through this reworking the event becomes much more palatable to us if at first negative or, if not, it becomes aggrandized, sometimes to impossible heights of human feeling, which we only wished we had actually experienced. The stakes here are grave enough, as the visions we think we recall often involve other persons' actions or presence. We seek to make them still and deep so that their image does not wander off into another nook of our ability to remember and perhaps cause us discomfort anew: "Indeed, images are *engravings*, for it is the imagination that engraves them on our memories. They deepen the recollections we have experienced, which they replace, thus becoming imagined recollections." (Bachelard, 1964 italics the text's). We cannot predict with certain accuracy the manner in which our imaginations will rearrange the elements of memory, so another function of works of art which can be made to correspond to a museum of artifacts is that we take conscious pride and care in arranging them in a specific kind of display. We are the most important visitor to this kind of art museum, for everything is in its place, as it were, even if there is never quite a place for everything

that we might need.

Entire epochs of culture may be said to engage in something similar: "When Hegel spoke of art as a thing of the past he meant that art was no longer understood as a presentation of the divine in the self-evident and unproblematical way in which it had been understood in the Greek world." (Gadamer, 1986). What a horrifying imagination then, which re-called to presence the idea of immediate divinity and thought that humanity could attain it through the single-minded cult of symmetrical and gendered beauty. The Nazi would-be gods on earth had this kind of imagination, and modeled their aesthetic valuation on not the classical world in its own light, but the forms of antiquity and the Renaissance and can we even now believe the Renaissance was as 'humanistic' as the historians incline? that were now treated as homologons rather than as incarnations of divinity. As Gadamer continues, this kind of transparency of corporeal ideality "... became impossible with the arrival of Christianity." (ibid).

Yet the aesthetics of the Third Reich, especially in its hyperbolic sculptures and the pedantic mimicry of ancient temples in its architecture, is actually only the far end of the process in which all memorializers participate. There is a conservation of history, specifically in our cases, one's own, that becomes the absolute value to which all means must unite in pursuit. What better way to preserve the aspired to future against the denigration of the past, as well as the idealized past against the unpredictable future, than to hypostasize the ideal human into an attainable earthly godhead? Aesthesis becomes prosthesis: "The work of the memorial is thus undertaken ceaselessly, as an ever renewed vigil against the change streaming around it. A memorial is not just an object in place of what has been carried away; it is, rather, a countermovement against the movement itself that carries away." (Horowitz 2001:139). We come perilously close to becoming our own 'other Nazis' if we take too seriously the artifactual properties of a work of art, if we see the art around us only as a function of culture or biographical memory, as morbid *aides-memoire*, rather than as true memento mori, which can only mark something or someone we have accepted as part of the work of mourning, and thus as the source of memory itself.

There are also specific physical places in which art stands first as artifact even before we have collected it and then made it do its singular duty of recollection for us. These are the objects that subsist on the margins of people's experience and in the corners of their consciousness, rather than those that exist in the brighter light of official spaces of vitality the gallery, museum or library, for instance, but also the concert hall and studio. As such, their *in situ* status requires that we excavate them, much as we hope they will later do for us regarding this or that memory they may serve to evoke or even invoke. For the more public works, they can be accessed

as marketed commodities or as publicized experiences: "In either case, the works exist in an art world's life in a way that is not true of works which, continuing to exist physically can only be found in scattered attics, secondhand stores or little-known churches. These lost works cannot be found by the conventional methods. People who want to experience these works for scholarly or other reasons will not know they are there to experience." (Becker, 1982). Works which have an existence marginal to the well-trodden avenues by which anyone who collects copies of art to use as memorials are akin to the remains of markers in graveyards without towns, which have survived by virtue of their potentially more durable materials and their occupation of land which may have little property value, not to mention their sometimes magical quality a caveat confronting the instrumentality of all things capital and material that warns off those who might trespass upon even the forgotten dead.

Such objects, filling up a littoral plain of spatial marginalia, unknown or occluded in the discourses of artism, and ignored as commodities which can be reproduced and which have a willing franchise of buyers, can, ironically, be both plainly and literally known to us upon rediscovery. The homebuyer who encounters the 'chattel' of previous families, cast aside by the changing drift of other persons' lives, or the more elite real estate which sometimes comes advertised as vending both 'house and contents,' are familiar examples of the romance of the discovery, the nostalgia of the quest for meanings which may link our lives with those who had passed before, whether or not there is any direct genealogical link. Because there are opportunities other than those provided by market or discourse to construct individuated archaeologies, the draw that typically defines avid scourers of the artifactual margins is likened to a treasure hunt. These other objects are 'free' in the sense of being untied to the larger fabric of discursive kinship. We encounter these 'new' objects rather differently due to their undiscovered aura. Not only are they new to us, we imagine that few know of their existence, or perhaps, in the case of artifacts made by families in pre-capitalist social formations the ad hoc efforts of the folk artist or the farmer who decorates his tools, for instance no one at all. At the same time, phenomenologically we are drawn by such marginal work closer to the authentic process inherent in all works of art. That we are no longer, for the moment at least, clouded by the trajectories of fame and value that veil well-known works of art, we can also recover the meaning within them through the experience of works which lie naked before us, neither unveiled nor elevated. We encounter the work as something irruptive to our own personal experience: "The time of reading or listening is detached from a vaster time from which it is excluded, as a painting stands out from the wall on which it is hung. When I read, only the time of the work exists for me. When I adhere to the work, objective time

vanishes along with the objective world." (Dufrenne, 1973). It may be only our historical or local ignorance that creates the effect of a more objective ignorance often experts such as auctioneers and appraisers have the minute knowledge of otherwise forgotten forms of art or craft but within the aesthetic encounter and its implications for the wider world of what one does know is art, these objects end up having a value far beyond what they could achieve if in fact they were known, and all the more so, if they were celebrated in some fashion.

DISCUSSION

The effects of representing the past

These objects made into artful subjectivity ingratiate themselves into our consciousness because of our imaginative renderings of others' presumed pasts. Yet we are able to lend credence to this experiment in distantiated observation, the phantasm of empiricism or the extrapolation of experience, because we are, and have, living examples of something similar to which we can point: "It is not as if I could observationally understand only those whom I directly experience. Not at all, I can imaginatively place the minds of people of past ages in quasi-simultaneity with my own, observationally understanding them through their writing, their music, their art." (Schutz, 1967]). Of course in doing so, we risk immediately and unselfconsciously what we risk only later on in a calculated manner through the museum display; we put at risk the utter intransigence of the object of which we know nothing, and so also the fundamental confrontation that the aesthetic encounter originates in and which is the source of personal transformation. The imagination may be all too rapid in its allaying of the anxiety which the strange must produce in us. Later on, when we have assimilated even the most alien of works, we lose their primary communicative force as the tongues of the dead. Our understanding is too subjective, and thus might not be suitable for artifactual status. These objects might well be destined to become only artefacts, as what we know about them is overloaded with sentiment and romance. If we do only thus, "We have yet to deal with the different forms taken on by this understanding in the different spheres of the social world." (ibid.). Inevitably, this also brings to the fore the problem of what can be defined as worthy of becoming the memorial we seek. Whether or not it is even art becomes an important question rather pawkishly given that this type of conversation usually only finds a willing home in the company of boors and bigots because we are aware that if an object fails in its artistic status, it has not the power to memorialize much of anything. It cannot transport us to past ages or lives, and it cannot utter the mortal language of the undead: "I am not sure that art can be defined. What I call art, you may think not art at all

and vice versa. But that doesn't mean that something you don't call art cannot touch you at a deep level, even if it is a feeling of disgust. So maybe one definition of art is something that touches you positively or negatively something that leaves you changed in some way (however minute) after having viewed it." (FTA). The depth of the encounter, as if something other is reaching into your being and transforming it after having transfixed it in its grasp, is perhaps what most reminds us of death itself, as we are stilled by the loss of consciousness and we are also impelled to move on to another kind of being, both in life, and perhaps also in death. Art that is validated beforehand can guarantee this arresting event more securely than can objects about which we may have some doubt, or further, those works which seem to have little artistic merit to the minds of our would-be former selves.

The artifactuality of the most ancient of surfaces and objects cannot yet fit into the usual media of artistic expression and representation. Speaking of the fifty thousand year old cave paintings at Lascaux, Merleau-Ponty admits: "I would be great pains to say *where* the painting I am looking at is. For I do not look at it as I do a thing; I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I see it." (Barthes, 1977 italics the text's). Akin to mandalas, the earliest forms of art may well have had a visionary or rite of passage function. More so than meditation, their function may have been imagined to envisage the actual hunt, or perhaps they may have been a portal to the dimension where animals and humans were still intimate with one another. For an eternity this is how it was with both art and life. With the advent of writing and the concept of logos, however, the image's power shifts dramatically, in a way not unlike the power of endurance that had hitherto been the exclusive province of oral narratives which linked generations separated by the vastness of time. Time becomes history, language becomes text, and art becomes increasingly liberated from preferentiality: "With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text thus has a *repressive* value and we can see that it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are above all invested." (Barthes, 1977 italics the text's). The explanatory function of a written language gives didactic instruction if it were not for poetry, we might all be fated to practice a form of this potent pedantry, whether in science or in literature and also directed description. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a few words alone are necessary to alter our interpretation of the picture, which then can be ensconced in the thousand further words of our imagination, words that the picture can no longer control. It is also the same with directed and calculated phantasms both of escape and envy. Memory may serve self-preservation, which is in fact self-projection inverted. The interiority of a being divorced from the world constructs its own personal museum, but one in which there is a singular and guarded entrance which others cannot

attain at any price. There is no *admission* to this museum, just as there can be no admission of its actual function. All objects displayed within are the mementos of mourning, but not of the dead. There is no moratorium for the object as 'mori.' Instead, we engage a world that we imagine would or could have been more than it was, and thus also introject a more ideal version of ourselves into that world, either as its source or its result. The memorializer who uses works of art to create a fantasy history sometimes can generate art of her own, as with the novelist who dreams the dream of narrative and of another possible world, even one based on part of her own life. But for most of us nothing but the privacy of the ideal environment is created. Nothing therefore emanates from such a world, and, at the same time, the world of others is lost to us: "The dreamer in his corner wrote off the world in a detailed daydream that destroyed, one by one, all the objects in the world. Having crossed the countless little thresholds of the disorder of things that are reduced to dust, these souvenir-objects set the past in order, associating condensed motionlessness with far distant voyages into a world that is no more." (Bachelard, 1964). Perhaps this is the stillbirth of a form of art, as when no story retakes the world from its seclusion, or no person returns to the world of fellow-humans to greet once again with the wisdom of a once separate and separated perception. That the memorial of the phantasm also generates great art is indisputable, but what is that awkwardness that cannot come out of itself? What blockade can inhibit the surges of idea and vision that still inhabit every interior of being, every reflection on being-in-the-world? Even the artist who overcomes his own stilled voice relies on the inertia of the history of all humanity, for it is only within this universal conversation that one of us picks up the common torch which had flickered and cindered: "This artist, who is buried in the anonymity of remote ages and who, without knowing it, becomes the ground of an incomparable experience, really has something to say; a humanity in search of itself stammers through him." (Dufrenne, 1973). The world itself continues by this process of recalling itself to itself, and we as well come into contact with the world of art as both representing the larger reality but also as reminding us that what is real is only the barest part of a world which is more past than present.

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ⁱ Or they become part of what for the time being should not at all be overcome: "I saw a sentimental substantial brick porch.' This is a very odd line, but it means a lot to me because it was a line that my husband and I wrote together when I delved into writing with him. I don't consider myself a writer, but he is one and during a year when both of us were unemployed, I decided to work on some pieces with him. This line is the only line that I remember from this time. It was a time that helped me understand my husband's world and why writing was such an important part of his life. For a short time I was brought into this world to full experience his art making with him and I hold this time very dearly in my memories." (FTNA; from interview transcripts self-defined non-artist. FTA designates same with self-defined artist).

ⁱⁱ The experience of art is often seen as an evolution of living being by participants: "Art or music appreciation does not come upon a person automatically; it begins early in life as a child is exposed to both by the parents or care givers. The mother hums or sings to lull a child to sleep. When a child is older, he or she is given a box of crayons and a coloring book to be creative, they are praised for their creations and encouraged to keep improving. This improvement teaches a child to be more creative whether in designing or knowing the words to an entire song. As we grow older these feelings grow stronger and direct us toward the appreciation of the work others put into—say, writing the words and music to a hit song, or to combine colors and shapes to create a portrait or landscape that can be displayed in an art gallery or your own home. As a result, a person continues through life knowing they can contribute to their surroundings by using these skills. We are not all Picassos or Irving Berlins, but we can decorate a home with pleasant color schemes, plant flowers that are colorful and pleasing to look at and fill a home with music. There is nothing more satisfying than when your child says, "Mommie dance with me," thereby extending music (art) to another generation. The electronic age helped people create images never thought possible. In my case I have been able to take hundreds of pages of text and turn them into a "pleasing to the eye" reading creation, giving me pride and a feeling of accomplishment." (FTNA).

ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps the age that gave us our most recent paradigmatic definition of what art is and should be was also fittingly the space of this desire enshrined as a form of art itself: "Everything the Romantics wanted to conquer sufficed for no more than a beautiful death. Their life-philosophy was one of death; their art of living, an art of dying. They strove to

embrace the world, and this made them into slaves of fate." (Lukacs 1974:54 [1910]).

^{iv} Thus such exhibitions also overcome the problems that the rest of us encounter not with art itself, but often with the artist and the artist and those who are responsible for much of artism. The following was typically reflective to this regard: "I think art, for the majority of people, is a form of posturing. They use it as a vehicle to impress others in similar societal roles to "rise above" somehow with their knowledge of a given work of art. Or, they attempt to impress others with the creation of a work of art ("look what I made") which is, of course, entirely the wrong reason for creating it. Others use it as an escape from their own, seemingly dreary existences they see a painting, perhaps, or a sculpture, and it allows them to fantasize about a different world a world within the painting. I have done this sometimes with songs. Thus, for wider society, I think art is somewhat helpful in that it gives people an outlet for their desire for power, or an outlet to escape (or express) discomfort. In my opinion there are very few true artists and very few people who truly appreciate art for its own sake. It is mostly a vehicle for being seen more favorably by others. Those who would say otherwise are, for the reasons I describe above, exactly the façade-wearing inauthenticity that I'm talking about. I'm sure there are exceptions, though." (FTNA).