

Fragments pour H. Fictional visits to the museum

In 1977, Roland Barthes wrote in a short text called 'Fragments pour H.': "Mais je vis selon la littérature, j'essaie de vivre selon les nuances que *m'apprend* la littérature."

Shouldn't it be possible then to learn from literature how to approach the museum, contemporary art and the exhibition? Can the history of literature interrupt art history, and slow down what would otherwise divide the artwork from the museum visitor by means of institutional and historical schemes? Can a total identification with a literary character open up ways leading to a personal but total recuperation of the artwork, and an existential exploitation of the museum? Can concrete experiences be induced by art, rather than simple and irreversible transmissions of knowledge, critique or meaning? By temporarily replacing life with fiction, art can temporarily be replaced by life...

This *modus operandi*, derived from world literature, starts long before entering the museum. It is important to have no preconceived notions about what a museum is or looks like, or about how a museum visitor should act. The rules of how art should be enjoyed are there to be respected – not because of the museum, but because of the visitor. Respect the museum and its protocols, not in an abstract way, but in order to intensify your experience. Ideally, one should go to the museum every time as if it were the very first time – as if the notion and the existence of the museum had just been revealed.¹

Therefore, the opportunity of going to a museum is not necessarily to be followed instantly. Sometimes, the idea of a museum visit can be productive in itself, especially when it occurs in the streets surrounding the museum. When

you are imagining a visit, the reasons that suggest another course of action – going home, for instance – are also to be carefully considered, for example when envisioning the other visitors, their numbers, their desire to talk and their inclination to look at you, rather than at the artworks.²

Another persistent but important obstacle before entering the museum is the bookshop. It is impossible to enjoy art without knowledge, but this knowledge has to be your own. One cursory reading of the catalogue, for example, can never be enough. Some exhibition catalogues are almost too heavy to lift, to carry around the museum, but also to incorporate and digest. There is no shame in buying this catalogue in the bookshop, and then returning home immediately to read it.³

When you do decide to visit the museum, it is very likely that one visit will not be enough. Conversation with other visitors afterwards, or a text in the catalogue, can rightfully incite a new visit, to look at the artworks again, in order to obtain a more fine-tuned and more personal opinion.⁴

This means that a museum visitor must have a mind of their own. In the contemporary art world, the agent to confront in these matters is not only the artist but also the curator. Try to find mistakes, doubles and omissions in the way the artworks are presented on the walls of the museum and in the catalogue, and confront the curator, if he or she is present.⁵

Never take the programme behind the exhibition for granted, and always examine the curatorial concept – isn't it too ambitious, and does it or doesn't it take you by the hand.⁶ The main question should not be if some kind of historiography is at work, but what kind of history this exhibition is trying to write. The first, most basic, accessible but very effective way to interrupt the simple musealization of art by Art History, is by obtaining an existentialist view on History in general. Every artwork is an act by one individual (the artist), watched by another

individual (the museum visitor) – what binds these two individuals is their personal relationship to eternity. So make sure the artworks get you under the influence of History, and both admire and regret what has been made and done by mankind before you.⁷

Written criticism – be it by an invited author⁸ or by an independent critic writing for a magazine or a newspaper⁹ – can help you think, because it can sharpen the way in which the artwork tries to think. The oral commentary – of other visitors, of museum guides – can have the same, although somewhat less focused function.¹⁰ Nevertheless there is never only one interpretation possible, and interpretation can never be entirely borrowed from someone else. The existence of an artwork is only legitimized by your own use of it. Nowadays, the main task of the artist might seem to be talking about his or her work as much as possible. This makes the classic intentional fallacy more persistent than ever. The way an artist talks about his or her work remains problematic. So touch the artworks, test their reality effect, talk to yourself about what is happening, discover the hidden project behind everything – especially if you are the first to discover it.¹¹

Aside from all these discursive mechanisms, in the museum every work of art is present in its own, non-reproducible physical materiality. This presence can be effective in a way that goes beyond language, and that is not immediately reducible to words. Visual art can be defined as a three-dimensional form that expresses meaning without using language or narrative. There is no other human invention that operates as such. So in the museum it is important to allow yourself to be affected and speechless, without any possibility of putting your thoughts in order, and without really knowing what exactly is happening.¹² This paradoxical state of mind might not go on forever, but it can be extended in time, for example by the way an artwork provokes a desire to corrupt or change its materiality¹³, or – on the contrary – by the way it tricks you into forgetting yourself, by watching closely, exactly in the way the artwork wants you to

watch. Always permit yourself, even if it is for a short period of time, to obey the rules of the regime of time and space that is installed by the work of art.¹⁴ By doing so, it should be possible to forget everything else around you, together with all the things that were bothering you before you came to the museum.¹⁵ There is no consensus on how long you should pay attention to a work of art: on the one hand, the time you need in order to learn the work of art by heart, might be sufficient¹⁶; on the other hand, it could be possible that you need to come back every other day to look at it – and that, if it is possible, you need to do this for the next thirty years.¹⁷ Always ask yourself if you have only just started looking, and then realise that it's complicated, and permit yourself to feel at a loss – or to feel nothing at all.¹⁸

If and when the time comes to return home, a visit to the museum can leave a trace in two opposite ways. You can be convinced that you have found something in the museum that was yours all the time – that you have retrieved something that you have lost a long time ago, right there in the museum, at the place where you would have least expected it.¹⁹ It is also possible that you have picked up something at the museum that you can take home, as if you met someone there who will become your life-long partner, who will watch over your solitude, and whose inconsistencies and qualities will guide you in your attempts at learning to live.²⁰

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Endnotes

1. 'My God!' he said. 'We could go to the museum...' And he caressed his chin, looking at his company while blinking his eyes. 'There are antiquities there, images, paintings, all sorts of things. It is very instructive. Maybe you don't know that. Oh! One has to see it, at least once.' The guests looked at each other, and were silent. No, Gervaise did not know such a thing, neither did Miss Fauconnier, nor Boche, or the others. Coupeau believed he had visited a museum once on a Sunday, but he wasn't sure. So they were in doubt, until Miss Lorilleux, who was very impressed by the importance of M. Madinier, found the offer very suitable, very honest. Since the day was wasted anyway, and they were all dressed up, they might as well visit something useful. Everybody agreed. Well – because it was still raining a bit, they borrowed umbrellas from the wine seller – old umbrellas: blue, green, brown, forgotten by clients – and they left for the museum. – Emile Zola, *L'Assommoir*
2. The entire day, I have been walking along the streets, and it is my own fault. I might as well have gone to the Louvre. Or no, rather not. A certain sort of people comes there, they try to warm themselves. They sit on the velvet benches, and their feet stand like big, empty boots next to each other on the grills of the heating. They are very modest and grateful, when the attendants in their dark uniforms with all their orders of knighthood decide to tolerate them. But when I enter, they grin. Grin and nod. And when I walk past the paintings, they keep an eye on me, constantly an eye on me, constantly in that cloudy, stirred eye. So it was good, that I did not go to the Louvre. – *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rainer Maria Rilke
3. On the fifth day I had enough of it. We had visited a friend of a friend of a friend on Long Island, and back in Manhattan in the afternoon, Groen suggested visiting the Museum of Modern Art. We didn't get past the bookshop. We both bought a catalogue and Groen said that he didn't feel like rushing through all these museum halls. A catalogue of 75 dollars was more than enough, he thought. – Joost Zwagerman, *Gimmick!*
4. 'Really? I don't know the ones at Chantilly,' said Mme de Cambremer, who had no wish to differ from Degas, 'but I can speak about the ones in the Louvre, which are hideous.' 'M. Degas admires them immensely too.' 'I must look at them again. My memory of them is a bit hazy,' she replied after a moment's silence, and as though the favourable opinion she was certain to form of Poussin before very long would depend, not upon the information that I had just communicated to her, but upon the supplementary and this time definitive examination that she intended to make of the Poussins in the Louvre in order to be in a position to change her mind. – Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*
5. M. Godard clapped his hands and pointed at a sign reading 'VISITORS TO THE MUSEUM MUST BE DECENTLY ATTIRED'. Then he pushed his way, with me following, into the second hall. The whole company immediately swarmed after us. I steered Godard to the portrait; he froze before it, chest inflated, and then stepped back a bit, as if admiring it, and his feminine heel trod on somebody's foot. 'Splendid picture,' he exclaimed with genuine sincerity. 'Well, let's not be petty about this. You were right, and there must be an error in the catalogue.' – Vladimir Nabokov, *A visit to the museum*
6. 'And the argument that some paintings have been on show more frequently, and in some cases too damn frequently – that this would be noticed by someone someday, is not something that should surprise us.' 'I would like to add the following to the discussion: can't we, just one more time, rethink the entire design and the actual intention of the exhibition, and maybe certain points of orientation, a certain plausibility...' 'A more modest aim, that is what we should be considering.' – Botho Strauss, *Trilogie des Wiedersehens*
7. They had been painted very minutely; yet, under the brush, their countenances had been stripped of the mysterious weakness of men's faces. Their faces, even the least powerful, were clear as porcelain: in vain I looked for some relation they could bear to trees and animals, to thoughts of earth or water. In life they evidently did not require it. But, at the moment of passing on to posterity, they had confided themselves to a renowned painter in order that he should discreetly carry out on their faces the system of dredgings, drillings, and irrigations by which, all around Bouville, they had transformed the sea and the land. Thus, with the help of Renaudas and Bordurin, they had enslaved Nature: without themselves and within themselves. What these sombre canvases offered to me was man reconsidered by man, with, as sole adornment, the finest conquest of man: a bouquet of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Without mental reservation, I admired the reign of man. – Jean-Paul Sartre, *La nausée*
8. The guests milled about the big white space with glasses of wine and talked loudly. My essay sat on the desk in a pile. I had given papers at conferences and seminars, had published in journals and magazines, but my work had never been distributed as a leaflet. The novelty pleased me, and I surveyed the takers. A pretty redhead picked it up and read the first few sentences. I felt particularly gratified when she moved her lips as she read. It seemed to suggest an added interest in my words. The piece had also been taped to the wall, and a few people glanced at it. One young man wearing leather pants appeared to read it in its entirety. – Siri Hustvedt, *What I loved*
9. 'Pépita Bourguignon is here', she said finally with a dry grin. 'Bourguignon?' he asked. 'The art critic of *Le monde*.' He almost had to repeat stupidly: 'of *Le monde*?', but he remembered that she was taking about the newspaper, and he decided to be silent, as much as possible, for the rest of the evening. – Michel Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*
10. It was quite a surprise after all this to find a group of pupils from St Narcissus on the upper floor, junior boys cross-legged in their capes and gaiters forming a semi-circle around the art master, a dynamic broad man built like a prop forward. I loitered on the further side of the room, looking with an adult eye at a row of tiny, almost invisible silverpoint drawings, but curious as a boy about the others and what they were being told. The master was explaining a set of landscapes: I heard how Orst had returned every year to the hamlet in the Ardennes where his childhood summers had been spent, and how he liked to escape from the studio and paint out in the forests and on the healthy upland. – Alan Hollinghurst, *The Folding Star*
11. 'Sir, I was not only joking. I must ask you to not touch the dolls.' 'Yes, but they are so real... so realistic... you just have to grab them.' 'Of course, those heads with clocks turn it into art', the attendant said. 'They make it special.' 'I don't give a fuck. It's more something for my high-learned friend Albert with his so-called surrealist tendencies.' And he continued, talking to himself rather than still addressing the attendant. – A.F.Th. Van der Heijden, *Doodverf*
12. I was therefore not in the best of states next morning at the Mauritshuis when I stood before the large group portrait, *The Anatomy Lesson*. Although I had gone to The Hague especially to see this painting, which would continue to occupy me considerably over the years to come, I was so out of sorts after my bad night that I was quite unable to harness my thoughts as I looked at the body being dissected under the eyes of the Guild of Surgeons. Indeed, without knowing why, I was so affected by the painting that later it took me a full hour to recover, in front of Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem Bleaching Fields*. – W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*
13. 'Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.' 'You say that art must not excite desire,' said Lynch. 'I told you that one day I wrote my name in pencil on the backside of the Venus of Praxiteles in the Museum. Was that not desire?' 'I speak of normal natures,' said Stephen. 'You also told me that when you were a boy in that charming carmelite school you ate pieces of dried cowdung.' – James Joyce, *A portrait of the artist as a young man*
14. It was only the closest watching that yielded this perception. He found himself undistracted for some minutes by the coming and going of others and he was able to look at the film with the degree of intensity that was required. The nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it. The film's merciless pacing had no meaning without a corresponding watchfulness, the individual whose absolute alertness did not betray what was demanded. He stood and looked. – Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*
15. In Amsterdam, at the Royal Museum, I had for a long time been standing in front of the painting by Antony van Dijck: Prinses Maria from England and Prins Willem II. A luxury of life that weighed heavily down on me, and that I had uptill then only vaguely suspected, I have discovered as if by magic in that nevertheless very simple depiction of the princely couple. An attractiveness and a melancholy radiated from it, incurably delicate; enabling me to forget all the other revelations of my youth. – Maurice Gilliams, *Oefentocht in het luchtdigje*

16. I stayed with the painting for more than an hour. I stood back from it, I moved up close to it, I gradually learned it by heart. I wasn't sure if I had discovered what Effing thought I would, but by the time I left the museum, I felt that I had discovered something, even if I didn't know what it was. I was exhausted, absolutely drained of energy. When I got back on the IRT express and closed my eyes again, it was all I could do not to fall asleep.
– Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*
17. Looking at *Man with white beard*, he said, I have always really loved *Man with white beard*, I never loved Tintoretto but I did always love *Man with white beard* by Tintoretto. I have been looking at the painting for more than thirty years and I can still look at it, there is no other painting that I could look at for more than thirty years. The Old Masters are tiresome if we keep looking at them unscrupulously and they are always disappointing on closer consideration if we turn them into a bold object of our critical mind. – Thomas Bernhard, *Alte Meister*
18. 'I realise now that the first day I was only barely looking. I thought I was looking, but I was only getting a bare inkling of what's in these paintings. I'm only just starting to look.' They stood looking, together, at the coffins and trees and crowd. The tour guide began speaking to her group. 'And what do you feel when you look?' he said. 'I don't know. It's complicated.' 'Because I don't feel anything.' 'I think I feel helpless. These paintings make me feel how helpless a person can be.' – Don DeLillo, *Looking at Meinhof*
19. You will find the book again at an exposition: the latest work of the sculptor Irnerio. The page from which you had folded the small corner to indicate where you were, is now lying on one of the bases of a parallel-epiped, glued, varnished with a transparent resin. A burning shadow, as if coming from a flame that rises from the middle of the book, makes the surface bumpy and that is why you see a lot of layers on top of each other, as in a knotty bark. – Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*
20. Too reverent to scoff and too dizzy to judge, my unexpected companion and I dutifully unwound our way down the exitless ramp, locked in a wizard's spell. Suddenly, as she lurched backward from one especially explosive painting, her high heels were tricked by the slope, and she fell against me and squeezed my arm. Ferocious gumbos splashed on one side of us; the siren chasm called on the other. She righted herself but did not let go of my arm. Pointing my eyes ahead, inhaling the presence of perfume, feeling like a cliff climber whose companion has panicked on the sheerest part of the face, I accommodated my arm to her grip and, thus secured, we carefully descended the remainder of the museum.
– John Updike, *Museums and women*