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"Artistically Seeing": Visual Art & the Gestures of Creative Nonfiction

"Paint not the thing, but the effect it produces."
—Stephane Mallarme

My husband can't recall if he was yet my husband when we saw "The Central Meridian (aka The Garage)" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In his memory, I was pregnant, and it was his first time traveling south with me to visit my family. I was eighteen and he was twenty. Our memories of that time are surely impressed with larger concerns: no home of our own, the little being that would change everything on our shared planet, and the forms of judgment and love our families teetered between upon our arrival. Within the next year, we'd be married and have our daughter in tow, but he doesn't know if that was the case just yet. He does know it was his first time in an art museum.

Within the bright white walls and sunlight pouring through the floor to ceiling windows, there was a door made of worn brown boards and rusty hardware with the words "The Central Meridian" inscribed across them. The viewer was invited to walk through swinging doors that squeaked upon entering the life-size diorama of an American garage. Inside, the walls were lined with shelves and cabinets full of jars, tools, deconstructed pieces of machines, and random items that might have been collected over a lifetime. In a video interview with Lyn Kienholz, the artist, Michael C. McMillen, calls the installation a "3-D walk-in assemblage" that reflects "the persona of someone who would've worked in this space." When asked if this is a fantasy garage or a representation of a garage he knew, McMillen says, "It's archetypal […] it's an illusion of a garage based on a lot of places I visited when I was younger." Both my husband and I have a strong association with garages like this. The smell of wood shavings, rusted metal, and dust, ignited a

sensory experience that moved us deeper into the installation and past it, simultaneously. Each detail—watering cans, license plates, the car elevated in the center of the space—demanded their own cognitive link, assembling a sense of place, both metaphoric and literal.

What is it about this work of art that has lingered with me all of these years? Is it the stated aim of the artist that "by entering into the piece you become a part of it" and essentially complete the story of the installation with your own associations and memory of what the concept "garage" means? Perhaps it is because I was at a threshold at the time I viewed it, the life inside me present in every thought, every consideration of my own history, one that was populated with dark, dusty places not unlike this replica. It might also be the realization that happened upon my viewing it: You can create a world that mirrors a life, the process of accumulation, even the persona who steers the experience—yet that world is still a made thing. A conjured event. Ninety percent of the objects were real, the other ten percent fabricated, treated in ways to make them convincing to a viewer.

In *The Art of Time in Memoir*, Sven Birkerts observes that, "*This really happened* is the baseline contention of the memoir, and the fascination of the work—apart from the interest we have in what is told—is in tracking the artistic transformation of the actual via the alchemy of psychological insight, pattern recognition, and lyrical evocation into a contained saga" (Birkerts 190). The act of "artistic transformation" is where I would like to direct this conversation by focusing on the ever-evolving genre of creative nonfiction, which requires a readership not unlike a viewership of those entering a museum, taking in an installation, canvas and/or sculpture. I contend that a curiosity about the object more than about the literal subject would relieve us of the need to deem a work of nonfiction prose as "true," "real," "accurate," or any number of ways we talk about the inherently false possibility of depicting a remembered experience in writing. In her essay, "On Nonfiction and Consequence," Barrie Jean Borich helps to clarify the creative nonfiction writer's aim toward accuracy with the awareness of time's inherent instability: "What doesn't change is the baseline intention of the genre, which is to use language as a way

of artistically seeing, interrogating, interpreting, and representing some aspect or version of what really does, or did once, exist in factual time and space" (3). In other words, form, structure and the process of invention—or "artistically seeing"—are just as important as the subject matter the prose is centered upon.

Similarly, in her book *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* Jeanette Winterson explores human relationship to art as society becomes less skilled at viewing artistic representations, both visual and textual. She writes:

> A book cannot be judged by its subject matter any more than a picture can. We need to look at the experiment of the piece. The riskiness of the art, the reason why it affects us, is not the riskiness of the subject matter, it is the risk of creating a new way of seeing, a new way of thinking. It does this by overturning the habits and conventions of the previous generations. New work is not just topical (although it might be that), it is modern; that is, it had not been done before. (52)

Winterson asks that we turn our attention to the "risk of […] a new way of thinking" but how does one measure risk? How do we distinguish our interpretation of the method from the narrative frame anchoring the attempt to the page? I believe we can get closer to "artistically seeing" when we notice the way a piece of prose is built, from what kinds of linguistic gestures and patterns, and the vantage points by which the subject matter is depicted, much in the way that visual art is analyzed through medium, perspective, and technique.

When we experienced "The Garage" my husband and I were framed by LACMA. Our interpretation of the installation was shaped by the primary fact of its existence in an art museum. If we had happened upon it while walking through a neighborhood, we might've taken it as literal, as actual. The impetus to see the garage as a made thing was a direct consequence of its location and frame, as well as the intention of the artist. What if we approached creative nonfiction as a curated piece of art, and position ourselves in a cognitive museum of sorts when reading? To some extent, we already do this, categorizing

essays as being "mosaic" or "collage" in their organization and read by the way of the frame of the essay's form. We call self-conscious linguistic movements within a piece of prose "metagesture," not unlike a discernable brush stroke, or impression of the potter's fingerprint left in the clay. In Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation," she claims, "What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence" (12). Rather than silence interpretation, we should expand our language and vocabulary dedicated to apprehending the made quality of prose. Armed with new tools and models, we might utilize ways of seeing and understanding that visual art and poetry already benefit from, enlarging the range of conceptual frameworks within the genre.

In the "Introduction" to the *Cream City Review*'s 30th Anniversary Issue, Sven Birkerts makes a direct correlation between the memoirist's act of rendering their subject and that of a painter:

> [I]t is only by the way of the texture of that couch, or carpet, that the writer (and, thus, reader) can grasp how the world presented itself back then, and therefore how it is that the past leaves its traces on life. The detail is, in this sense, partly pretext. It functions for the memoirist as the piece of fruit does for the still-life painter—as an occasion for studying the nature of solidity, the play of light on objects, the perceptual process. (5)

Not only does the nonfiction writer study the objects that reverberate in tandem with experience, but they must also impart physical movement, a sense of passing time, an emotional tone, as well as a consciousness of self in relationship to all of these narrative physics. In *The Language of Inquiry*, Lyn Hejinian interrogates the inherent limits of poetry and language, expressed through prose forms: "Writing's forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work's motion. The material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and language itself" (42).

Looking closely at the writing of Sarah Manguso, Deborah Tall, and Maggie Nelson, and presenting them in conversation with modern artists and those theorizing about the connection between writing and visual art, I intend to illustrate how closely the meaning-making and observation of artistic approaches already parallel one another. In each section, I will place these voices in dialogue with the artistic process and product, exploring the ideas of collage/décollage, sculpture, and performance art.

I. Collage/Décollage

The collage artist Mark Bradford produces wall-sized paintings and installations that are a reflection of "the conditions that are going on at that particular moment at that particular location," using a combination of signage from city streets, including business advertisements and merchant posters, twine, and glue. "My practice is décollage and collage at the same time. Décollage: I take it away; collage: I immediately add it right back. It's almost like a rhythm. I'm a builder and a demolisher. I put up so I can tear down. I'm a speculator and a developer. In archaeological terms, I excavate and I build at the same time," says Bradford. On the "Paradox" episode of *Art 21*, Bradford illustrates his process, gathering merchant posters from fenced areas left over from the L.A. riots. He fuses them with glue and other smaller pieces of paper, periodically sanding away the layers he's just created to reveal portions of the language underneath.

Similarly, in Sarah Manguso's book, *The Guardians: An Elegy*, readers are guided through a meticulous sequence of prose sections that attempt to pull apart the experience of having lost a close friend to suicide. There are no chapters to slow or break the momentum of her telling, just sections accumulating from beginning to end. The reader is compelled by the story's inherent immediacy, a morbid curiosity and, in some moments, a brutality that speaks to the inescapable and harsh mortality we all face. Manguso begins with an epigraph, "All signs are misleading," which functions as a warning of sorts—cautioning us against looking for answers in what she presents of her friend's story, as well as instruction

for how we might read the prose itself. She often brings self-consciousness to the fact that she is telling a story. One example of this: "I'm working on a book about a man who jumps in front of a train. I have no interest in hanging a true story on a scaffolding or plot, but what is the true story? My friend died—that isn't a story" (30). And a little later when trying to imagine the sequence of events leading up to his death, she guesses that "[h]e might have jumped a subway turnstile. He might have walked, in pouring rain, to the Bronx. He might have thought he was saving himself from something" (50). We are reminded that her rendering of his death is conjecture, a summoning of everything she knew and could surmise from a decade of friendship and intimacy, but still a best guess, a storyteller's way of climbing through a long tunnel of grief. Like Bradford, she builds the world of her experience and memory of her friend, and then shears it away by drawing attention to the act of writing this book, revealing the larger story of loss at the center of this evidence she has gathered, which paradoxically can't "tell" the story adequately. He collects signs as evidence of the larger concerns of a culture and in placing them in relationship to one another, allows a narrative to emerge.

In between the moments Manguso focuses on the puzzle of her friend's death, she weaves in the story of their friendship and allows the reader to feel the reverberations of their bond. One of my favorite passages recalls the conversations they would have about his penis, "Aside from a couple of intoxicated kisses, Harris and I never attempted to touch each other, so his penis was always safe from the responsibility of its power. We could talk about it as if it were an amazing restaurant in another town" (17). Apart from its humor, revealing them in this way showed the boundary of their relationship and therefore, the boundary of the frame from which she could tell this story. She describes a day that he calls her, needing help packing up his apartment. He lets her move through the dirtiest corners of his dwelling, a kind of trust in itself. She writes:

> I remember the moment in the dark gray light at the end of the day, as we finally tied up the mouths of the black garbage bags, when I knew Harris would ask me to lie down

> with him. // That night I lay down with Harris and he held me. I counted to five and got up and went to the sofa, and on that night we became brother and sister." (28)

In this small moment, Manguso does a lot of narrative work, both through the beautiful, foreboding image of tying the mouths of the bags and in her reframing of this scene as a kind of origin story for their familial connection.

No matter where Manguso takes us in the scope of the book—the streets of post-9/11 Manhattan, the year-long visit to Rome—we never forget that this is an elegy, a lament for her dead friend. We travel through the beginning and end of her own suicidal ideation, the death of lesser friends, and ultimately, come to confront death's unyielding presence. She writes, "I still have something, though, that came with the death and never went away: anticipatory grief, the mourning that takes place before a certain death or loss…I started grieving good and early, so that when the deaths happened, I'd have a head start" (95). In the act of narrating her process of grief, she takes us down to the most elemental parts of loving another person—that we risk losing them, in fact, we are guaranteed to. The concise, poetic language of Manguso's collage/décollage ultimately reveals a narrative arc at the foundation of her project. The constraint of her chosen form provides a foundation where she tangles the delicate strands of her relationship with the mystery of another's consciousness.

In her more recent memoir *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary,* Manguso explores her obsession of tracking time through meticulous journaling in her early life, then watching as those compulsions gave way to the flex and stretch of mothering. And while this book is, in part, about the sea change of motherhood, that experience works as a way to illustrate memory (or the lack of it) and how we are ultimately vulnerable to forgetting what we think should remain, another iteration of the act of building layers only to shear them away. "The memory and maybe the fact of every kiss start disappearing the moment the two mouths part," writes Manguso, as she reiterates the science behind memory and the "contamination" of remembering an experience.

Unlike *Guardians*, *Ongoingness* is structured with short sections that range from a couple of sentences to a full page. Each section ends with a diamond-shaped symbol to indicate that the "entry" is complete. It doesn't function like a diary, as the title would suggest, but a series of observations and anecdotes that are loosely connected by a linear consciousness. In the prologue to the book, she writes about the process of creating the manuscript and how early readers encouraged her to pull content from her twenty-three years' worth of diaries (a million words, literally) as a way to shape the arc of the book. Manguso writes, "The only I thing I ever wrote that wasn't for an audience was the diary" (94) and explains her challenge in attempting to find a narrative thread to pull forward from so much text. She goes on to explain another dimension of trying to curate the telling of your own life, "But I was even more afraid of facing the artifact of the person I was in 1992 and 1997 and 2003 and so on. Time punishes us by taking everything, but it also saves us—by taking everything" (91). It was at this point in the book that I realized Manguso is investigating an idea: what it means to have lived through a multitude of selves, without attending to the narrative elements of their stories. She is displaying the consciousness of having gained a cache of remembered and forgotten moments, yet resisting the common movement into character description and event narrative arc.

Mark Bradford's artistic discovery comes with the realization of choice and agency over what elements come together to complete the whole. He says, "It was revolutionary for me that you could put things together based on your desire for them to be together […] It's not an artwork or a book. It's a state of mind. Fluidity, juxtapositions, cultural borrowing—they've all been going on for centuries. The only authenticity there is what I put together." In the case of Manguso's *Ongoingness*, the collage/décollage happens in what is not present on the page, as if gathering the evidence of her recollections in air. Her preoccupation manifests as an attempt to harness consciousness at the moment it evaporates, whereas *Guardians* was an attempt to make something solid out of the inarguable loss of her friend. Perhaps this is

the ultimate effect of collage/décollage: The meaning comes through the trace of what was once there, rather than what remains on the canvas or page.

II. Sculpture

The sculpture artist Leonardo Drew is known for reworking and recycling his pieces, keeping certain works in a constant state of incompletion. He says, "There's always layering that happens because life is going on so you're layering things that you're experiencing… It just keeps perpetuating itself. So there's never a moment where there's anything that's unsuccessful. It's just that it's continuing on." Beginning in 2012, Drew tried his hand at varied processes—including etching, lithographs, and papermaking—becoming more familiar with the techniques and their potentials. "I even did some experiments on all of them just to sort of see where my language was going to fall, where my vocabulary would fall within the printmaking parameters," he explains. In a similar way, the nonfiction writer who is interested in reflecting the process of discovery in the frame of the writing leaps between tangible and imagined spaces, formed largely by the unexpected that occurs in the act of making. Especially when working in a lyric mode, the emphasis is less upon the timeline and more toward a sculptural effect. Sven Birkerts adds that,

> [M]emoirists are all in a sense philosophers of being who have taken themselves as subjects, as instances, who are all grounded in a metaphysical astonishment at the fact of existence, the signature expression of which is the lyrical mode—not for its own sake, not because a certain subtle or rich musicality of prose is pleasing, but because the recreation of the kinds of sensations and accompanying states of consciousness they are after requires it. In the process, inescapably, they cannot but reflect almost continually, either directly of implicitly, on that which is at once the medium and object of the quest: Every memoirist is, with Proust, in search of lost time." (4-5)

If we think of the self, or "the fact of our existence," as the site of an open studio and surrounding us are collections, piles, weathered bits of materials to pick up, inviting us to layer and resonate against one another ("sensations and accompanying states of consciousness"), to look at in relationship to other simultaneous projects in process, and compare to previously constructed pieces, how might this curating, this sense of opportunity and choice, inform our writing?

One example of an author who sculpts and constructs prose with the materials of experience might be Deborah Tall, whose memoir *A Family of Strangers* leads the reader through a life-long inquiry, one that moves us through a childhood of questioning familial connection and an adulthood spent recreating and restoring what discoverable threads of lineage remain. Midway through the book, we get a message from Tall's subconscious: "In a dream, History bows her head, pretends she is my servant, that I can ride her carpet to the planet of fact. // 'Remember, my mother is Memory,' she persuades. 'My fee is time'" (115). One could argue that this is sage advice for anyone sidling up to the task of systematizing a life, especially one that continually defies the most earnest asking, "Where do we come from?" And because there is no one in Tall's immediate family willing to tell her the answer, she finds and curates a thick net of outside voices—poets, theorists, psychoanalysts, historians—to assist her.

This book is, first and foremost, a model in form. Tall builds numerous levels of connecting structures. At the largest level, there are five sections, each one comprised of repeating (with some variation) subheadings ("Sign of the Times," "Anatomy of…" "Secrets: Kept and Unkept," "Geographical Genealogy," etc.). She uses italics to indicate other source work, which correlate to an impressive "Notes" section in the back of the book. The choice to separate her citations from the prose is was a way to weave the writing of others into the consciousness of the narrative without the interruption of attributive gestures. One almost ironic example of this, in a section titled "What I Think," (because she uses someone else's words), is a single quote from Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*, "If there had been anything more than silence, would I have felt the need to speak in the first place?" (71). This single-sentence chapter is

not an anomaly within the narrative units this book offers, as most sections/chapters move from one sentence/line to several pages, always adhering to short paragraphs.

It is this formal variation, in part, that maintains the sense of immediacy as readers move through the book. From the beginning we are introduced to a void of knowledge/knowing, which is meted out to us slowly. The reader takes on this absence of fact as a foundational structure by which the insistent, almost obsessive, inquiry is built. Each small discovery eventually assembles into a collection of tangible family members, who arrive with their own threadbare version of the family's history, yet we never fully grasp the whole. The unrelenting truth of Tall's familial "odyssey" seems to be that she/we never will. The effect of secrecy and omission is the heart of her grief. She identifies herself in a section called "The Dead" when she recalls Torok's theory that "some people unconsciously carry the painful psychic burden of several generations of ancestors, particularly inherited silences" (95). Even though Tall's memoir fragments are built on insistent questions, she never leaves her reader with the same sense of absence of information. One always feels as if she's telling you everything she knows and that you are on a journey of discovery she herself endures. She does this by blending and juxtaposing an interior lyric voice with an exterior journalistic voice. An example of this is the moment she arrives in Kiev to meet her relatives. One section, titled "Anatomy of Genealogy," faces another section, "Anatomy of History." The "Genealogy" section is written in five, double-spaced lines, poem-like and inhabiting a collective consciousness. She begins, "Yes, sometimes people migrate backward" (254). In the "History" section, a reporter voice appears as she considers the landscape and the ways her ancestors intersected: "But beneath the surface, up close, Kiev is a fateful place, every corner backlit by what it has witnessed" (255). Where the multitude of voices meets up is where our conscious understanding of her experience is configured.

Leonardo Drew concludes of his sculpting process, "There's no other way of doing it except for this physical manifestation I have been through. As I'm moving closer and closer to answering questions, at the same time I'm moving farther away from the answers. So all I have to do at this point is continue to

place my body in the act of attempting to know." Similarly, Tall's examination of what can be known, the nature of memory, the uses of secrecy and the reverberations of silence bring her to a family tree with few remaining limbs: "In the end, hard as I look, I will be left with a genealogy of the missing" (203). Adding to the devastation of an erased or evaded family identity, Tall must also contend with those she does find being beyond her help. I keep coming back to that idea of the "some" that carry the psychic burden of generational silence and that this book is a way to mitigate that damage by providing a bridge to future generations to a place that was not available to her. In the final section, she reveals her cancer and how it, too, is a concern of generational proportions. Past the physical ailment, she writes, "I dream most that my children may inherit a legacy of absence and yearning" (295). In the end, she has written herself and her children into a highly-constructed representation of their lineage, illustrating that it's not only about the reclaiming, but the authoring, the architecture of your own life.

III. Performance

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is an intellectually rigorous, narratively daring, and culturally crucial dialogue between lovers, between theorists, and ultimately, with the reader, challenging social constructions of gender and family. The central relationship is that of her and her partner, prominent artist Harry Dodge, and their experience of marriage, parenting, and simultaneous experiences of pregnancy (Maggie) and top surgery (Harry). The title (from Roland Barthes) acts as a metaphor for the book's trajectory, as Nelson tells how the Argonauts replaced each piece of their ship, The Argo, eventually constructing an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form. This, Barthes argues, is just like when the lover utters "I love you," its meaning needing to be "renewed by each use" (5).

This "renewing" of language and ideas is part of Nelson's critical prowess. Over and over, she finds new ways to present old ideas in complex bodies, one could argue some of the oldest, as she takes on ideas around motherhood and pregnancy. Her approach is that of a palimpsest, texts on top of texts, with

the ghost of one thought shivering in the margins of another (or many others). In his essay "Genre Queer: Notes Against Generic Binaries," Kazim Ali asks that we think of texts as a body: "The text is a body because it is made of the flesh and breath and blood of a writer. The 'mind' which declares intention is a collection of senses, sense-responses, and memories. Chemically it is invented in the brain. Thought *is* matter" (28). *The Argonauts* has been referred to as "genre bending" and even coined as "autotheory" (a blend of autobiography and theory), with Nelson using the physical body, both hers and her partner's, as the site where these language shifts occur.

Catherine Opie's *Self Portrait/Cutting* is gestured to throughout the book (as are many other artists and performances), first to illustrate the artist carving two female stick figures on her back and then later, to illustrate a healed carving of the word "pervert" across her chest as she breastfeeds her child. (Note: a young Harry appears in this series of photographs). Nelson quotes Opie speaking of the balance of her artist, professor, mom, partner and sexual self. She goes on to describe depictions of adult genitalia in narratives about childhood rape or trauma. The convergence of body and story is one way we learn how to view our own sexuality, Nelson contends, a societal view that toggles between sensuality and terror. Nelson jumps from Opie to Monro to Freud, eventually ending up at a personal anecdote in which she and Harry take their five-month-old sleeping baby to a friend's burlesque show where they are turned away, not because of the baby, but because of the interruption of a baby in a place where adults want to inhabit an adult-only world. The intertextual gymnastics blended with personal narrative and a description of Opie's photographs join together to form a prose performance, derived from the source material and propelled beyond it, using both the body of the text and the literal bodies of the author, Harry Dodge, and Catherine Opie.

From the sequence described above, my head was swimming with the density of other voices Nelson calls upon to craft her arguments. As a book with no chapters, just occasional extra spaces to indicate an intentional switch in the narrative, it seemed paramount to construct a way to vary and clarify

who is speaking when. Nelson accomplishes this by placing the name of a given theorist/author/person in the margin directly across from the italicized text that quotes them. Other times, she gives traditional attribution or excerpts with indented block quotes. This range of quotation and use of others' language creates a surprisingly intimate effect. One example of this is toward the conclusion of the book where Nelson provides a long narration in which Harry describes Harry's mother's death. This lowercase, italicized voice is interspersed with Nelson's account of their birth experience. Juxtaposing the experience of death with birth is in and of itself, dramatic, but more than the story, it is the fact that the language is clearly Harry's—a person who has been integral to the book, but has been somewhat silent compared to the strength and insistence of Nelson's authorial voice. The effect of the passage reads almost as a monologue, or a dramatic attempt to break through the academic density of the text to reveal the voice of Harry, who has been set up throughout the book as pushing against Nelson's compulsion to render their experience through writing.

Nelson questions, "How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or sexuality—or anything else, really—is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours?" (53) This was one of many cruxes in this book, bound to the account of her and Harry's relationship. She reveals the recalibration that occurred for her in falling in love, then the outside world's infringement on it, then the new shape she and Harry worked toward through pregnancy and testosterone. She disrupts the traditional story of bodies, of love and of family. Lyn Hejinian writes, "Language gives structure to awareness. And in doing so it blurs, and perhaps even effaces, the distinction between subject and object, since language is neither, being intermediate between the two" ("Writing is an Aid to Memory" 23). Nelson uses language to question the ways we've named, from the most commonplace definitions of binary gender to the most complex arguments for/against meaning-making, but brings in many other artists and writers to help her

illustrate. Somehow, she crosses between the art forms, perhaps as the ultimate reflection of her union with Harry Dodge, a visual artist and filmmaker:

> And now, after living beside you all these years, and watching your wheel of a mind bring forth an art of pure wildness—as I labor grimly on these sentences, wondering all the while if prose is but the gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness (fidelity to sense-making, to assertion, to argument, however loose)—I'm no longer sure which of us is more at home in the world, which one is more free. (52)

The distinction she makes here between the feral nature of visual art and the containment of writing points to the inherent limitation in comparing visual and written forms of artistic expression. Language demands comprehendability, and while many can appreciate those attempts that play "loose" with structure in the traditional literary landscape, there will always be those who seek narrative, recognizability, and consistency.

Conclusion

In my experience with "The Central Meridian (aka The Garage)," the collection of materials, some already existing, some fabricated, invited a kind of delight, in both the surprise of expression and the familiarity of form. The pleasure, in part, arrives when the viewer cannot locate a seam between the imagined and the real, left to rely on the most prominent signage for how to read the experience. In a *New York Times Magazine* interview, the writer Anne Carson says about writing: "[W]e're talking about the struggle to drag a thought over from the mush of the unconscious into some kind of grammar, syntax, human sense; every attempt means starting over with language. [S]tarting over with accuracy. [I] mean, every thought starts over, so every expression of a thought has to do the same. [E]very accuracy has to be invented." Borrowing ways of seeing, vocabulary, process, and a framework of curation by which visual art is formed, the prose shaped in our time will stand multifaceted.

Perhaps it is already assumed that creative nonfiction is an artistic expression and, on the most basic level, functioning under the same kinds of expectations and permissions from its audience/viewership. Creative nonfiction is not a singular genre, but a gathering of related subgenres, stretching into new forms, provoking bigger questions of shape and invention, at times, over the literal subject of the linguistic exploration. What does the framework of visual art offer us that we don't already have? Returning to Sven Birkerts, we might track and accumulate "the alchemy of psychological insight, pattern recognition, and lyrical evocation" as the moving parts of the larger narrative apparatus (*The Art of Time in Memoir* 190). In a sense, "artistically seeing" calls for a tolerance of ambiguity, a habit of mind that leans toward curiosity over comprehension, delighting in innovation and familiarity simultaneously. Along with the inevitable question, "What is this about?" should be the deeper inquiry, "How is this made?" "Where does the language conjure its maker?" and ultimately, "Where has it taken me?"

The writer makes a series of choices from the first sentence of the essay until the final one. She must consider each word, hold it in her mind as if it were part of a sculpture, or a brushstroke on canvas—building and tearing away the interrelated pieces until a satisfying shape emerges. Once satisfied with the work, the reader is invited to enter the room in which the piece has been installed, the lighting tipped at a precise angle, meant to cast shadow or light, depending on the intended effect. The reader will behold the work, the primitive cogs of comprehension, sight, and association clicking into motion as the essay is taken in, the weight of the whole moving from the display to the mind of its viewer in increments, in sentences. Secondarily, the astute reader (perhaps the reader who is also a writer) will go back and seek the medium, the technique, will note the lineage of its form, the other voices and gestures that echo out from the pages like palimpsest, and will understand that this text is a made thing, a language performance of an original consciousness, paradoxically unreplicable and emblematic of everything that came before it.

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