

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

ASAP  
JOURNAL /

SLANT RHYMING

By Alexandra Kingston-Reese – July 9, 2018



After-images overlap image upon image, one from the past, one from the now. Biologically speaking, an afterimage is a “visual sensation which remains after the stimulus that gave rise to it ceases”; the bright or dark orbs that cloud your vision after looking at the sun for too long. For Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory*, the after-image demonstrates “reflexive perception”:

Perception does not consist merely in impressions gathered, or even elaborated, by the mind. This is the case, at most, with the perceptions that are dissipated as soon as received, those which we disperse in useful actions. But every attentive perception truly involves a reflexion, in the etymological sense of the word, that is to say the projection, outside ourselves, of an actively created image, identical with, or similar to, the object on which it comes to mould itself. If, after having gazed at any object, we turn our eyes abruptly away, we obtain an ‘after image’ of it...

A hint of *déjà vu*, the double take, the slant rhyme, the half chime: this is the experience of reading a certain kind of contemporary novel whose author also writes art criticism. Though there has been a long history of predominantly white male novelists and poets writing about predominantly white male artists (remember Mallarmé on Manet, Henry James on Tintoretto?), more recently this phenomenon has expanded beyond such a privileged circle to solidify and secure itself as one of the most distinctive transmedial directions in the contemporary arts. Building on early proponents of the late

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

1990s and early 2000s including Chris Kraus and Siri Hustvedt, a younger generation of award-winning and, let's be honest, eminently popular twenty-first-century novelists have embraced not only a new form of autocritical reflexivity but critical language. From the one-off essay in *Frieze* (à la Ben Lerner's "The Actual World"), to regular columns in *Artforum* (Rachel Kushner) and *The New York Times* (Teju Cole's "On Photography"), to the appealing and steady rise of book-length collections of essays on art, the blur between craft and criticism refracts what aesthetic experience, in its democratic and negative modes, looks and feels like now.

Recent examples of the long-form collection include Teju Cole's *Known and Strange Things* (2016), Siri Hustvedt's *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind* (2016), and Zadie Smith's *Feel Free* (2018). Lee Konstantinou has called this new breed of novelists "writer-critics," adopting Smith's terminology in her 2007 essay "Read Better"; Nicolas Dames has called them foundational members of the "theory generation." But here, they are also writer-collectors and writer-curators: these are writers whose novels are writing against the image, through traditional ekphrastic forms and incorporating visual images; as text bumps up against the visual image, they are writing against the image of the conventional novel. To adapt the phrasing of Cole, "in placing one thing next to another" these writer-critics "create a third thing—and this third thing, like a subatomic particle produced by a collision of two other particles, carries a charge." The slant rhyme of this collision produces a practice-based reflexive relation between creative and critical aesthetics. By reading critical forms of art writing against the art writing that occurs in contemporary novels—by reading slant—we can draw a map to authorial sensibility, artistic value, and ethical apprehension about contemporary living in fictional worlds and the political now.

No one is quite so potent at handling the slippage of modal properties between visual and literary, fictional and critical, as Cole himself. Amateur-turned-auteur-photographer, art historian, photography critic for *The New Yorker*, and novelist, Cole's breakthrough came with his first novel *Open City* in 2011, in which he "wanted to tell the story in a way that reflected the way a certain we live today—the experience of buying books, reading books, going to museums." Since, he has published *Every Day is for the Thief* (a short novel that juxtaposes his own photographs against an almost blog-like diaristic account of the narrator returning home to Lagos), produced two exhibitions of photography, one of which has been turned into a book, and a collection of essays. For Cole, photography and writing are both "expressions of the same instinct . . . both are my way of aspiring to lyric poetry."

Place and memory overlap each other in each of Cole's works, and much of his criticism. In "Object Lesson," he responds to Susan Sontag's anaesthetization of vision that occurs when we look at conflict images by finding emotional impact in the quietly forceful object photography of Sam Abell, Sergei Ilnitsky, Glenna Gordon, and Gilles Peress. Solitary objects left behind, "worn through use" or "frayed" by "the hours of some person's life" linger for longer on the memory than "yet another horrific photograph of a corpse." Politics of vision are located, too, in aesthetics of blackness. In "A True Picture of Black Skin," Cole draws attention to how "the dynamic range of film emulsions, for example, was generally calibrated for white skin and had limited sensitivity to brown, red, or yellow skin tones. Light meters had similar limitations, with a tendency to underexpose dark skin." Even with the invention of digital photography, "there are reminders that photographic technology is neither value-free nor ethnically neutral"—a point that we can't help but align with contemporary US politics. Aspiring toward a lyrical mode of photography that also attempts to be ethically and ethnically observant then does not only expose subjective blind spots but encourages us to remember, to borrow Cole's words, that "darkness is not empty." With his new project *Black Paper*, created "in response to the US election," his own photographic practice is taking charge of these critical concerns, as "responsive work" documenting an "ongoing" crisis.

Many contemporary writers use Twitter experimentally; many contemporary photographers employ Instagram as a gallery of their creative process or even a "studio," where "we see how an obsession develops and not simply what it

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

looks like once it is on the walls of a museum or between the pages of a book.” Cole is part of both camps: using Twitter for a period of time in 2012 to reinvent the modernist practice of the *faits divers*, before moving to Instagram, a visual platform on which his two photography exhibitions *Blind Spot* and *Black Paper* took shape. While *Blind Spot* was photographed with 35-mm film, “the length of the text” of the voice-overs “was partly shaped by writing on Instagram,” and *Black Paper* began as #blackpaper. Cole’s use of Instagram means that his creative practice is visibly ongoing as relational art:

Once we’ve fallen in love with an artist’s work, isn’t one of the things we most long for to get inside that artist’s head, to somehow get closer to the creative process? This is why we read interviews, it is why we look at sketchbooks, it is why we pore over contact sheets. Instagram, at its best, can replicate aspects of this directness; it can be a conversation that unfolds gradually, over weeks and months. We see how an obsession develops and not simply what it looks like once it is on the walls of a museum or between the pages of a book.

Indeed, writing about Gueorgui Pinkhassov’s Instagram practice in 2012, Cole’s remark reinforces not only the intimate pleasure of viewing art privately, but how work viewed in this space “regains its aura.” Stripping the work of the old ways, the immediacy of Instagram is “a pleasure for the pure lover of the image: while lying in bed in the morning, you can see the latest work from a photographer you find interesting. The image comes to you.”

Politics of vision, and more specifically, politics of blind spots, are propelled to the fore in Siri Hustvedt’s art writing, too. As she argues in an essay on Louise Bourgeois, because “the perceptual experience of art is literally embodied by and in the viewer,” “we bring ourselves with our pasts to artworks, selves and pasts, which include not just our sensitivity and brilliance but our biases and blind spots as well.” Writing in the foreword to Cole’s *Blind Spot*, Hustvedt is also alert to the neural and biological limitations of sight, tying lapses in vision to the potential political repercussions of metaphorical blindness and the moral obligation of artists and writers to fill out the picture our “poor peripheral vision” fails to grasp.

In a book length essay on “The Delusions of Certainty,” Hustvedt goes further to argue that blind spots are ineradicable, but perceiving with a sensitivity to their inevitability “means adopting multiple perspectives because each one has something to tell you and no single one can hold the truth of things. It means maintaining a lively skepticism accompanied by avid curiosity. It means asking questions that are disturbing. It means looking closely at evidence that undermines what you thought had been long settled. It means getting all mixed up.” Seeing is testing and must be committed to with a self-critique that doesn’t punish but that which celebrates doubt as a “necessity” of intellectual inquiry. Indeed, “not a single idea or work of art could be generated without it.”

This is where a novel like Hustvedt’s 2014 *The Blazing World* comes in—rather than a detached sensibility concerned with the spectator, narrative rather than essay shows us an artist outraged by what she sees as the gendered blind spots of the contemporary art world. The novel is a fractured kaleidoscope of perceptual difference, assembled to expose blind spots borne out of bias, assumption, and ego, fictionalizing how “sexism and racism are born of skewed perceptions,” whereby “masculinity and whiteness” are treated “as absolute categories.” Writing in the foreword to Cole’s *Blind Spot*, however, she gestures to the aesthetic, but also political, thrust of the novel. “Meanings are not immediately evident,” she writes. “Sometimes they elude us. Sometimes our expectations make us blind.”

If not vision, then what? If you read enough of Hustvedt’s art criticism, you notice that she returns often and admiringly to Henry James’s maxim that “in the arts feeling is always meaning.” Just a quick glance across her critical oeuvre—from the early *Mysteries of the Rectangle* (2005), *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012), and most recently *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind* (2016)—shows how instrumental this formulation is to her own

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

understanding of the aesthetic experience: feeling “is crucial to understanding a work of art” (2016a). But what kind of feeling does Hustvedt mean? When acknowledging the complex relationships between subjects and objects in her novels, the “edges” between the emotional, perceptual, and physical become even more “blurred” (David Maclagan 12). Though emotion is deeply embedded in her conceptualization of art, Hustvedt’s art feelings refer not simply to the metaphysical states, but to the bodily sensation of touch, so much so that “an artwork becomes senseless without it,” as she argues in the title essay of her most recent collection. From lingering over how “the artist affects us at a deep and wordless level of human experience that goes back to infancy—being held and touched” when writing about the Italian still-life painter Giorgio Morandi in *Living, Thinking, Looking*—to proclaiming that “all works of art, including the novel, are animated in the body of the spectator, listener, or reader” in an essay on perceiving the imaginary, for Hustvedt the comfort (or threat) of touch hovers in the vicinity of artistic production and aesthetic experience. Experiencing art thus does not only require the faculties of sight, but the ability to feel the effects of art within the body. Setting bodily sensation in tension with perceptual experience, the following pages consider just how much states of aesthetic absorption are informed by the modalities of desire.

To touch and to be touched: by structuring responses to art as bridging these two states on a physical and metaphysical level, Hustvedt follows Jacques Derrida’s model of a surface as an ephemeral conduit for affective sensation:

How to touch upon the untouchable? Distributed among an indefinite number of forms and figures, this question is precisely the obsession haunting a thinking of touch—or thinking as the haunting of touch. We can only touch on a surface, which is to say the skin or thin peel of a limit... But by definition, limit, limit itself, seems deprived of a body. Limit is not to be touched and does not touch itself; it does not let itself be touched, and steals away at a touch, which either never attains it or trespasses on it forever.

Sense of touch, then, oscillates around liminal space, feeling its way between body and mind and between subjects and objects; Hustvedt’s characters’ desire for touch often recognizing that touch isn’t necessary a connective force. A critical practice that is itself a form of touching points us in the direction of Sontag’s erotics of art—a way of sensing (this time in its cognitive rather than somatic ‘sense’) the “luminescence” of the work of art without needing an interpretative interface. Certainly for Hustvedt—who has written at length about her own experiences of mirror-touch synaesthesia—“looking at a painting, reading a poem or a novel, listening to music requires a natural loosening of sense boundaries, a blur that invigorates artistic experience,” so much so to press upon such “intersensual qualit[ies]” is to resituate the body as both critically and affectively essential to experiences of art.

In contemplating Hustvedt’s insistence on the blur between affective feeling and touch feeling, it is clear how the somatic conditions of art-making not only frames but illuminates the possible structures for affective responses to the artworks. And glancing sideways to encompass both her art criticism and what we could call her art novels—*The Blazing World* and *What I Loved* (2003)—we can see the effect of the slant rhyme: by focusing on the hands and sensibility behind the object, as well as the affective and bodily responses of the perceiver, Hustvedt reinvigorates a form of experimental aesthetic discourse that sees perception, making, experiencing as embodied. Even aesthetic terminological metaphor isn’t safe from scrutiny, as she works through the absence of the body in aesthetic discourse: “Why do I not like the word taste when applied to art? Because it has lost its connection to the mouth and food and chewing.” Though she does not suggest we begin to eat art, “if we thought about actual tastes, the word would still work”: rather than seeing as feeling, “a crossing of our senses” would still occur so that “seeing” would become “tasting.” What this clever wordplay suggests about Hustvedt’s aesthetics is that not only does embodiment seep into every crevice of encounters with art—when we make art, for example, the object becomes “an embodied intentionality”—but by queering the visual towards the haptic, feeling registers as both affective and somatic.

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

Since Sontag's 1964 essay "Against Interpretation," critics have danced around the role of the body and feeling in critical engagements with art. Pleading for an "erotics" rather than "hermeneutics" of art, Sontag famously argued that "interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there." Noting that "what is important now is to recover our senses," her grammar implies a lack or gap in critics' then sensory faculties. Indeed, though she might not be signaling a complete absence, there is enough of a loss to require that "[w]e must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more." But if Sontag's plea was a response to the hegemony of interpretation in the mid-1960s, where do we sit today? It would be rather foolish to insist that we've learnt our lesson, but the recent "method wars," to borrow Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski's term, have certainly put fresh pressure on the task of the critic, carving out a space where touch, emotion, and affect have taken hold as popular modes of approaching our critical experiences of art. As Anker and Felski have described, the rise of post-critique has drawn out the long dissatisfaction of affect theorists "who challenge the rationalism of critique and its frequent neglect of emotion, mood, and disposition," while also deeply embedding what feminist theorists have been practicing all along: "experiential and embodied dimensions of the viewing experience."

No essayist compels us to feel as much as does Zadie Smith. Famously noting in "Love, Actually" in 2003 that "there is something about love that does not sit well with the literary academy," Smith recounted how youthful impressions of literary fiction located in the realm of personal subjectivity disappear when we "became intellectually responsive to the text". On *Beauty* (2005), Smith's art novel, tracks the slow professional demise of Howard Belsey, a worn-out Rembrandt specialist. But a heftier ambition is the novel's desire to make significant the democratic potential of depicting different encounters with art and modes of understanding them. Viewed through the eyes of female characters like the young student Katie, the ex-nurse now-wife Kiki Belsey, and her occasional friend Carlene Kipps, the novel retrieves art, if only briefly, from the "rarefied language of exclusion" of "Aesthetics" that Howard claims his classes aim to reevaluate (while nonetheless continuing unashamedly in the same manner). Democratizing the modes of responding to art does not erase the aesthetic altogether but recasts the phenomenology of perception through what Smith claims is the equally valuable lens of aesthetic sentimentalism.

Reviewing her first collection of essays *Changing My Mind* (2009), Peter Conrad noted how for Smith, "criticism is a bodily pleasure, not an abstracted mental operation." In her most recent collection of essays, *Feel Free*, published earlier this year, this preoccupation is amplified. *Feel Free* comes as an invitation, a confrontation, a promise, an invocation; a call to feeling, as much as it is also a call to freedom. But though Smith has turned her eye to art writing before in her novel *On Beauty*, this is the first time her non-fiction art writing has been collected together. The central section, "In the Gallery," takes us through Smith's various gallery experiences over the last ten years. In "Killing Orson Welles at Midnight," Christian Marclay's *The Clock* becomes "the art object Sontag was hoping for" when she remarked that "transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today," but for precisely this same reason the essay fails to offer "the right form in which to speak of it": "it's hard to convey in words what Marclay does with data, how luminous he makes it."

And yet Smith returns again and again to the fictionality of the art she writes about, itself a kind of artistic luminescence. Of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, British-Ghanaian short story writer and artist, Smith notes how the "dark heritage red" walls on which the artist's portraits hang in the New Museum in New York bring to mind "the calico covers of nineteenth-century novels," a literary vision that emphasises the imaginary figures inside the frames: "Yiadom-Boakye's people push themselves forward, into the imagination—as literary characters do—surely, in part, because these are not really portraits. They have no models, no sitters. They are character studies of people who don't exist."

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

In many of Yiadom-Boakye's interviews, she is asked about the source of her images, and she tends to answer as a novelist would, citing a potent mix of found images, memory, sheer imagination, and spontaneous painterly improvisation (most of her canvases are, famously, completed in a single day). From a novelist's point of view, both the speed and the clarity are humbling. Subtleties of human personality it might take thousands of words to establish are here articulated by way of a few confident brushstrokes. But the deeper beguilement is how she manages to create the effect of wholly realized figures while simultaneously confounding so many of our assumptions about the figurative.

Emphasising that "there are quite a few dancers, lithe in their leotards", the essay reminds us that at the time of writing, Smith's fifth novel, *Swing Time* (2017), a novel about dancing, had just been published.

Throughout these essays, we are reminded that Smith, too, is a master of character, and the style of her art writing fully points to a novelist's craft, not the training of an art critic. Though she has reflected that essay writing is both "a form of relief" and "an attempt at a kind of clarity," Smith often turns away from the essay for more experimental forms when writing about art. "Asked to write an introductory essay for a book of Billie Holiday photos," she tells the reader, "every angle seemed too formal or cold." Writing about these photographs could only take the form of ventriloquy. No tired observations about composition, form, or history here: "Hair takes a while, face takes longer. It's all work, it's all a kind of armour. You got skinny a while back and some guys don't like it, one even told you that you got a face like an Egyptian death mask now. Well, good! You wear it, it's yours." No more Keatsian Grecian urns: it's ekphrasis, stream-of-consciousness style, reimagined for the twenty-first century.

Herein lies not only the intermedial but transdisciplinary value of literary writing about art. For literary scholars, the near rhymes that these essays create against the fiction that is most often privileged in academia offer fruitful and distinctive ways of re-experiencing those fictions. Literary-critical efforts such as the ones Smith displays are valuable for the discipline of art history, as Jás Elsner notes, for their peculiar "attempts to rival or to emulate the range of emotive, formal and textural resonances evoked by the object described." Indeed, it is shortsighted to designate artists and critics as solely one thing and one thing only—Yiadom-Boakye is both painter and writer; Smith is both novelist and critic. As Amy J. Elias insists, it is "hubris and desire to mark off intellectual territory that causes us to believe that writers" like Smith, Hustvedt, and Cole "have/had nothing to say about the fundamental formal, ethical, aesthetic, and political basis of art," given that "so many artists today are theoretically savvy and have so much to contribute to criticism." In fact, the task of reading contemporary writer-critics now is not simply a case of claiming the value of novelistic art criticism and ekphrasis to the interpretative practice of art history. As publications like *Frieze* or *Artforum* have been demonstrating for a while now, we are better off opening a path forward that doesn't automatically consign writing about art to the domain of art historian or professional art critic; criticism benefits immensely from the embodiment that comes from the language of craft.

Writers like Smith, Hustvedt, and Cole, then, not only mediate aesthetic experience through a distinctive critical-literary language but create an aesthetics of experience through a critical literary mode, borrowing language from philosophy, art history, aesthetics, and literary theory in order to articulate it. Indeed, Smith has worried openly about the equivalence of intimate specialism and disciplinary qualification: in the Foreword to *Feel Free* she discusses an "anxiety" that "comes from knowing I have no real qualifications to write as I do. Not a philosopher or sociologist, not a real professor of literature or film, not a political scientist, professional music critic or trained journalist. I'm employed in an MFA programme, but have no MFA myself, and no PhD." However, there is something really important in the caveat that follows: "my evidence—such as it is—is always intimate." Not only for Smith herself, but for Cole, Hustvedt, and the novelist-critic more widely, the intimacy of writing about personal aesthetic and embodied experiences of looking, viewing, reading, listening, is made everyday, ordinary, quotidian. Rather than altogether sublime, they are made accessible, democratic, and urgently necessary.