

Distractedly we dance

May I ask you something...are you writing a poem? Although I had already felt she was trying to get a glimpse of my notebook, the impertinence of the question amused me all the same. Interesting, I thought, how much one can read from a person's body language, such as the slight tilting of her head to communicate that she was seeking an opportune moment to start a conversation – communication which I had successfully ignored so far. Her gentle, elderly voice drew me out of my absent-mindedness as she explained how I seemed somewhere else, but full of attention, in a contemplative state of mind. A gaze slowly drifting away, towards the landscape, then suddenly back to the notebook that was resting on my lap, jotting down nothing more than a few words at a time. Ironically, she did not mind disrupting what she described so respectfully. Clearly my outward appearance did not represent what was going on in my mind, quite the opposite in fact, as my thoughts were completely lacking any direction, and the landscape passing by the train window acted as a screen diverting my unfocused mind. Despite her interruption of my thoughts, while peacefully minding my own business, the gentleness she displayed made me regret my earlier attempts to avoid starting a conversation. I smiled involuntarily, encouraging her to continue her explanation, in order to at least partly make up for my unfriendly behaviour. According to her observations, the words I was scribbling down were too few to be prose, and she described how outward attention makes the mind absorb what it finds in front of it, to transform it into words. Outside becomes inside becomes outside becomes inside. The premise I deduced from all of this would be that if one resembles someone writing a poem – contemplating, thinking, hesitating, writing – one could well be a poet, which, admittedly, is a reasonable assumption.

Writing poetry or not, at least there was a similar economy in what I was doing, although it was not the landscape passing by, but some abstract impressions I was trying to put up for exchange, hoping to receive a few words in return, groping for some vague notions and trying to find some precision through the scribbles in my notebook. Or was it really precision I was trying to find? Writing down this story of a conversation that took place in a train about two weeks ago, I realise, in this process of trying to remember the words we exchanged, how much I repeat or construct the same clichés. Even now, I almost convince myself that, perhaps, I was writing a poem after all. Nonetheless, I was actually enjoying my nearly thoughtless mood, as it exempts the mind from a certain pressure to take an interest in what it observes. I do not think of this as indifference, or apathy, but as indulging in an enjoyment of an absent-mindedness that, for me, allows things a certain spectral, ephemeral presence. Perhaps it is somewhat comparable to the eerie experience of entering the studio at night, a place where I do not belong at that time of day, as it enjoys a nocturnal release from its nine to five duty of being my studio. Only upon my untimely entrance do all things slip back into solidity to offer a stable ground to work on, a threshold moment in which a mutual commitment, an agreement between me and my things is simultaneously suspended and re-established: an instant in which a seemingly stable state of affairs allows some space for things to be different. So, perhaps absent-mindedness can quasi-materialise as a moment in between passive receptivity and active engagement, as a moment to loosen some of the ties that bind our thinking to the way things are. Interestingly, the woman thought she had recognised the kind of attention I tried to escape from, or maybe better, she was quite literally looking for a resemblance to a certain image of thought.

I wish I could see what she saw. A mirror to capture such a fleeting moment would have to perform some magical trick, because once you focus on yourself, the attention would be on your image, not on your attention. Can you ever see yourself thinking? Or, equally self-reflectively, can you see yourself seeing? Clearly not, as the mirror only displays two eyes and, at best, duplicates a penetrating stare that obliterates what lies behind the image of a gaze. And, more specifically, can attention ever pay attention to itself? If so, this implies that attention is simultaneously one and two things: an action, namely a focused, intentional perception of a thing, as well as a clear and distinct

sensation of its own functioning. Attention would then be a mental force that could objectify itself and lock itself up in a closed feedback loop; so as to exert the objectifying power it has over any external thing it directs itself towards. However, it does not seem to work this way: attention never quite gets itself in focus, even when its operations are sensible, metaphorically speaking, as in a sideways glance or as a reflective surplus of the performance of its primary function. A cat and mouse game between a mental function and its attempt to reflect and understand itself, to forge a solid ground for the relationship between things and thinking, through thinking getting a grip on itself. Having said that, in a more pragmatic take on reality, attention often only becomes an issue when it forgoes its duties, when it is absent during moments of distraction – attention's other, which is clearly suffering a more dubious reputation in terms of the moral standards it represents. When we say we are distracted, we tend to mean we are not focusing on what supposedly deserves or needs our full attention, such as thoughts drifting off while attending a lecture, or, a mobile phone seducing the eyes away from the road in front of the car. Distraction in that sense seemingly dissolves the power the mind exercises over that which it finds or positions in front of itself, shattering the unifying capacity of attention. However, at the same instant, distraction is much more and much less than attention's ground zero. It is something in its own right, albeit a something that cannot really be anything, because it annuls the relationship between mind and thing. In terms of existence, distraction does not exist in the same way as a plant or a pencil. It is not a thing and it does not stand in opposition to thinking, although, as a dispersal of mental energy, it entertains a relationship to thinking, perhaps as a not-yet-thinking, a beyond-thinking, or a not-anymore-thinking. In any case, distraction and attention are two entirely different things. It goes without saying that if paying attention to attention is already quite a challenge, paying attention to distraction is probably an even more delicate undertaking, one that requires the utmost discretion. As it can never be approached frontally – obviously focus makes distraction disintegrate – it can maybe only be encountered in a fleeting sensation, in the same moment where it is destined to recede. In any case, the instant a voice materialised, coming from the friendly person sitting opposite of me, my distraction dissolved, and so did the reverie that, until that moment, had successfully resisted the assembly of any coherent thought. I was in fact distracted from my distraction.

I answered her that I was not writing a poem, but, instead, was trying not to think, and then asked her if her observations stemmed from any particular interest in poetry, or physiognomy. She said she practices neither, but that she is an avid tango dancer and on her way to a tango festival in Antwerp. Not knowing anything about tango, I asked if there is anything particularly noteworthy about the festival and the tango scene in that city and we ended up talking about tango for a while. It turned out to be not such a strange question, as there are many local tango traditions across the globe, at times revealing large differences in comparison to the original tango from Buenos Aires, which is also still practiced today. I learned that Antwerpian tango is less strict than some other local varieties, such as the one from her hometown, for it does not take Argentinian tango as a liturgy to be followed literally. Tango is never boring because of these local differences, it is like a language composed of a vocabulary that the dancers use to improvise, designing a personal style. She explained that that is why watching other people dance can be such an enjoyable experience. One can read it as an expressive, poetic language. When one sees people dancing, in one's mind one dances along, as a matter of speaking of course, as it is not really a purely mental activity. Watching things move produces a feeling of being moved, of an affective force working upon the whole body, only rationally reflected upon in second instance. In such a moment, can we say we are paying attention to the dancing people, the moving bodies in front of us? To say we pay attention feels reductive, as if the situation relies on an intentional act from us, a decision to focus on the movement in front of us, whereas it actually seems to work the other way around. In the first instance, we just move along, maybe even distractedly, before a more reflective mode of mental activities tries to frame the affective forces. But at first, we just move along.

I do not remember how we ended up talking about Vincent van Gogh, perhaps it was because we had both read the same newspaper article about the publication of a recently discovered sketchbook, supposedly made by Van Gogh himself, which had caused turmoil amongst experts, as its authenticity was at once disputed by other leading experts and researchers. The story constructed around the discovery was actually too perfect, so therefore it could as well be true, the forgers must have thought, which is not such a strange hypothesis after all. The sketchbook, initially hidden between some ledger files, contains drawings from an important phase in the artist's development, who at the time was living in southern France. These were studies for the paintings that were made around the same time – at least according to the discoverers, whose scholarly reputation is at stake, perhaps as much as their pensions. It all seems too good to be true, because they are a proverbial 'missing link' needed to complete a larger image of the artist's work, produced by earnest, decades-long art historical scholarship, as the piece that completes the jigsaw puzzle.

We sceptically decided that any unified image of an artist's oeuvre is a fiction, as unity is not an intrinsic property of artistic practice. Although not being experts, we came to the conclusion that we feel uneasy about the declared authenticity of the discovery and the veracity of the scholars' claims. Looking at the newspaper images, the drawings seem too finished, or, which is maybe saying the same thing, they are too much an image of something they unsuccessfully aspire to be. These drawings are not searching for anything, but deliver answers before a question has been formulated. They are too clumsy, yet they look too much like a Van Gogh. However, a real Van Gogh, of course, cannot really resemble a Van Gogh, because it already is a Van Gogh. As he was a great artist his work can only ever differ from itself. Only in this difference something veracious can be realised. But, if difference is the carrier of a truly open question and the impetus to a searching that is truthful beyond its potential answers or outcome, then how do we recognise this?

Attention is clearly one of the main conditions that enables the scholar to do her work, that which allows her to design a unified image of the world in which things make sense. But is it possible to pay attention to difference? Those scholars who discovered the sketchbook paid attention, they paid attention so well it allowed them to locate resemblances where we could not discern any. Yet, at the same moment, there also seems to be a certain distraction at play in the manner in which they have produced a resemblance of two things. The distraction operates in the manner in which visual factuality is obliterated by a discourse designed to distract us from the obvious awkwardness of the drawings, especially in comparison to other works by the artist. This discourse apparently is so effective, that in a way it does not even matter anymore whether these are drawings by the real Vincent van Gogh or not. More interesting than the drawings themselves is the way in which they produced these mechanisms of distraction through competing narratives that are equally invested in the claim to represent reality as it happens. What is most fascinating is the speculative, ridiculous fact that a deformed pastiche of the work of a great artist, one of the most well known artists ever, whose brushstroke is recognised even by laymen, can pass for a real work, even if no one really believes in it. The force field that produces authenticity is completely externalised and laid bare in front of our very eyes. And, seen from the outside, this does not seem to have tempered the powers that are at play, perhaps even the contrary is the case. It has no coherency and is hopelessly fragmented by conflicting interests, some of which are clear, others of which less so, but, again, this does not really matter. Its externalised character makes it into a force field composed in the key of distraction, and apparently this is also the field where truth, or the absence of truth is located, or for that matter produced. Whether these drawings were really made by an artist named Vincent van Gogh, who spent a few years in Southern France to paint and to draw, was rendered trivial, and since a few weeks, sixty-five new Vincent van Gogh drawings now exist. We can observe them and consider them to be clumsy pastiches, or we can observe them and admire them for their clarity of line. Maybe they even move us, because, just like when we watch people dance tango, we allow ourselves to be moved. Distractedly we dance.

Some, but not all, of the ideas in this text are borrowed from the few books and essays that exist on the topic of distraction, of which the most important one for me personally is *The Problem of Distraction* by Paul North. The train journey took place on the 19th November 2016.

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