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Alarmed Entanglements

Möchten Sie mit dem Bild schlafen?
Would you like to sleep with the image?

I was in Munich, on a weekend getaway courtesy of *Deutsche Bahn* and all its delays, at a modern art museum which shall go unnamed but unnamed. And I had come dangerously near to a Cy Twombly painting.

'Lepanto V', which hosted a scattering of ships on a fragmented pale blue background, had drawn me in with crayon and graphite, colluding with my poor eyesight to beckon me closer and closer until *ah!* a step too far—past a non-existent floor marking—and the alarms sounded. The (almost) haptic replaced by the (crushingly) sonic. I stumbled back, apologetic and dithering, straight into the security guard whose pursed lips and clasped arms caught my fall. She was not best pleased, and uttered the question above. I could tell my own battle cycle was about to begin.

I'm sorry? I understood her loud and clear, but hoped a transition to English would allow her to rephrase her (rhetorical) question. It did not. *I said, you seem so in love with the painting, you should just sleep with it! Why would you get so close?* I hadn't been thinking, I admit, only feeling. I knew, however, that was no response to her authority; to touch was not to protect, to puncture was not to repair, at least by her precepts.

I knew it was right—or at least, correct—to apologise, and did so with adequate fervour, though not without acknowledging that her question had caught me off guard. I even conjectured that a gentler tone would have been appreciated. But I had already been deemed a degenerate, a monster of the gallery. She huffed, and walked off. And for the rest of my time in the Lepanto room, I could sense her stare of contempt cutting into my looks of desire, or perhaps just beaming onto *me*. At the end of this optic chain lay the Twombly, perhaps none the wiser about the scene which had just unfolded before it, in its name.

In the lower third of 'Lepanto V', there's a burst of pink-lilac. It's almost three-pronged, posed like a trident, perfect for one's hand to hover over. Relentlessly it grabs the attention, though I knew now not to rise to the provocation. I lowered my eyes, suddenly a bit ashamed about my display of passion; I was Blanchot's Orpheus, who could 'do anything expect look this "point" in the face, look at the centre of the night in the night'. The harsh museum lighting reminded me where I was, of my place.

Wollte ich mit dem Bild schlafen? I've been thinking about the question since. It wasn't such an explicit act I sought, I wouldn't say, but there was a physicality I felt moved to perform; this much was true. And if I did want to touch the painting—hug it, caress it, brush it with my fingertips—would that have been so strange?



Women therefore inspire love even when made of stone.
οὐκοῦν τὸ θῆλυ, καὶν λίθινον ἤ, φιλεῖται

There's a story in the Pseudo-Lucianic *Amores* about a young man who fell in love with the statue of Aphrodite of Knidos by the sculptor Praxiteles. Initially giving the impression of immense piety, he would spend his days at the temple staring down the moulded goddess, whispering sweet nothings in her ears, scratching messages of love and love's partner, hate, onto the walls around her. Praxiteles he honoured immensely for his *techne* as if the craftsman were Zeus; Aphrodite in this form he worshipped even more. And one night, his passion escalated into a sex act, leaving an amatory blemish which tarred Aphrodite on her thigh, and the boy himself was driven to suicide, hurled over a cliff, or deep into the sea's waves.

After hearing the tale, the *Amores* character Charicles, who had himself run up to the Knidia earlier and kissed her with slobbery lips, wonders whether the boy's response would have been even more heightened, had the 'beauty' (κάλλος) at hand been truly alive and breathing (ἐμψυχον). But is not the fact that this Aphrodite *cannot* be real—that she frustrates attempts at actual sexual activity, that her being an object rebuffs these men who want to engage with her as an objectified person, crucially a *living* one, that her materiality is made all too evident—the very point? 'Lucian's exposition tells us about the goddess' arrogant grin, her eroticised thinly-parted lips, the one hand which loosely covers her nether regions. One wonders whether the sculpture is meant to 'know' about her allure, whether she flirts with the idea of her unattainability. Or is all this to project too much onto static Parian stone?

The stain the obsessed youth leaves stands out as a black, damning spot against the brightness of the remaining marble, its 'unsightliness' (*amorphous*-ness, ἀμορφία) there for all to see. An excitement, an embarrassment, a transgression, his overfamiliarity with a work of art—with a statue of a *goddess*, no less—will damn him to obscurity for as much as it left its own mark on Aphrodite: with this deed, the boy is condemned to be nameless (ἄνωνυμον), while Praxiteles' art will live on in praise's cloak of fame. Even if Aphrodite's beauty is exceedingly (a)rousing, even if her sculpted back and hips seem to invite approach, to make sexual advance on a piece of art is a step too far, an irrational act which flies in the face of sophisticated aesthetic reception. At the same time, this irrationality seems to plague all the men in the *Amores* narrative who encounter the Knidia, as if their erotic projection is the most natural reaction in the world.

The temple woman who found this amatory aftermath the following day would have perhaps wished for the modern museum's alarm system.



The hermeneutic quest is always founded on the repression and perversion of desire; the objects of understanding are always bare. The long gaze fetishizes, and so too, unequivocally, does the handling of the object that signifies.

In the chapter 'Arousal by Image', in his book *The Power of the Image*, art historian David Freedberg will untangle the question of the 'desire to gaze on representation' and the implications (and parameters) of sight's 'male conditioning' in thinking about the image and its reception.

Reading Freedberg's text, I could not help but think of the noblewoman Emma Hamilton, and the male 'long gaze' displayed towards her 'Attitudes'. Lover then wife of Sir William Hamilton, Emma's Naples-based performances of female mythological figures—subject to painting, etching, caricature, diary entry, praise and ridicule—were a verifiable sensation. Pushing *tableaux vivants* to motive and emotive limits, Hamilton arguably became something of an artistic canvas—a Knidian marble, if you will—onto which famous, Grand-Tour-hopping elite men would project the images found of the vases of William Hamilton's vast collection, and more abstractly, with which they could launch their Graeco-Roman fantasies. The face that launched a thousand ships?

Sie weiß zu jedem Ausdruck die Falten des Schleiers zu wählen, zu wechseln, und macht sich hundert Arten von Kopfputz mit denselben Tüchern. ... Er findet in ihr alle Antiken, alle schönen Profile der sicilischen Münzen, ja den Belveder'schen Apoll selbst.

She knows how to choose and change the folds of the veil for every expression, and makes a hundred kinds of headgear with the same scarves ... He finds in her all the antiquities, all the beautiful profiles of Sicilian coins, even the Belvedere Apollo himself.

Goethe, purportedly having already enjoyed two nights of the 'Attitudes' (cf. *Italiänische Reise* II. Caserta, den 16. März 1787), sees in Emma (*in ihr*) whatever of antiquity he would like displayed. It is an enthusiasm which tries to subsume, almost totally, the person into the plastic.

And yet even in this passage there is a glimpse into Emma Hamilton's autonomy, into her variation of movement, gesture, and expression, into her appreciation and application of her own appeal. She carries out a form of classical reception which is itself undesiring but intellectually understands the nostalgia for antiquity others possess. Emma's act of 'self-handling' is aware of what her body, and its various forms, can 'signify', and so she proceeds, knowingly toeing a line between reality and story for an audience who provide excessive longing in response to her detached—but nevertheless intentional—embodiment. So, while a perverse form of Goethe's desire unfolds in his tale, as he pays no heed to—say, 'represses'—Emma's. But there is still something so poignant in Emma's ability to move (*zu wählen, zu wechseln*) that Goethe's viewing, and also ours, must take stock, even if his narrative attempts to dominate with his gaze. As Helen Slaney emphasises in her 2020 [BICS article](#), to solely push the 'Pygmalion' paradigm onto Emma Hamilton, to analyse her only as victim to the 'lascivious eye', is to do a disservice to her knowing and creative exchanges in the arousal of her image.



Maybe, meandering between 'Lucian' and Goethe, it is easier to see why my closeness to the painting came across as an affront. Like the youth's stain on Aphrodite's otherwise pure marble in the temple, it constituted the breaching of a social contract in a space I had entered, in this case as a viewer within a museum. But unlike Goethe's erosive and erasing 'long gaze' onto Emma Hamilton, and unlike Charicles' 'relentless' embraces of the Knidia, I like to think I looked upon 'Lepanto V' quite dif-

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ferently, 'touched' it differently, too. Sure, I also projected on Twombly in that very room; his lines and colours could be whatever I wanted of them, whatever I saw *in* them. But there wasn't the same predation, the same prodding, the same assumption of power: I didn't want *alle Antike*, nor to partake in the objectification of women's bodies, in stone or flesh. My eyes didn't propagate an 'ideology of men'; instead they sought a non-normative tilt, a queerness of clasp. Could I see here the Trojan ships? Could I nestle there *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patrocles* in another form? Only painterly intimacies could reveal the (perhaps manifold) answers, only closeness could tell.

The Soul has / moments / of Escape / When twisting / all the doors / She dances / like a / bomb / abroad / and Swings / upon / the Hours

After Emily Dickinson, 'The Soul has Bandaged Moments' (1862)

ROSe / brief, / brief in its beauty / but the / Scent / better than Fame

After Patricia Waters, 'The Ordinary Sublime' (2006)

Here are lesbian roses, I thought. I had walked into the room over from the Lepanto cycle, into a gallery blooming with Twombly's roses. And there they towered, dripping in red, pink, orange, and yellow expanse, *my* lesbian roses. Accompanied by Twombly's verse adaptations of carefully selected poems, the *Untitled* flowers which housed Dickinson and Waters' lines in their layered petals spoke to me the most. Engulfing me in their embrace, they wanted me to point at their gaps, trace their textures. The poems were written and rewritten, scratched in to-and-fro, papered and plastered over, with the outcome of near intelligibility. These were inscriptions worth transgressing for, in surface-and-depth interplay. It was as if I couldn't *not* get close. *But is there a space in which I would really be allowed to do so?* I wondered.

Then I read *We the Parasites* (2023).



We the parasites, feeding on the art to make reviews and papers.

Be gone, bugs that secretly bite into the euphonious!
έρροιτ', εὐφώνων λαθροδάκναι κόριες.

In her five-part essay-memoir, critic and art historian A. V. Marraccini writes about the experience of critique, and the relationship criticism bears towards its source-material. Throughout Marraccini's prose, the critic is a parasite, elsewhere a wasp, and *not* the fig; the critical gaze 'tear[s] apart' and 'claw[s]' into the 'soft, central flesh of the tree bud', analysing with an 'erotic' bent of desire, as scholars wanting texts to mesh and interact for their own means, acting 'like children who make two dolls "have sex"'. A language of violence emerges, of leeching and mooching; crucially, the parasite is sustained (however temporarily), if not 'fed', by the writing and artwork into which it burrows itself. The nature of the critic's task reveals in — what is to them, sweet — darkness, as they inhabit shadowed crevices of 'novels and paintings and poems and architectures' which, though not

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originally in their possession, are then made theirs. These ‘parasitic’ images are to be found all the way back in Hellenistic and imperial Greek epigram (e.g. *AP* 11.321, 11.322, 11.140), wherein pesky *grammatikoi* are imaged as ‘bookworms’ (σητες). Playing curious commentators, they treat poems’ ‘roots’ as sites of exploration, albeit of the unmethodical kind ‘grubbing about’ (ῥιζωρύχα) denotes; ‘casting darkness (σκότος) onto children starting to learn’, their greatest trespasses are to do with consumption, with how they ‘bite into’ euphony, how they ‘weaponise’ monosyllables, and chew up critical conjectures only to spit them back out.

The fig-wasp relationship is not as simple as this, however, as Marraccini’s opening paragraph alerts us: as an ‘inverted flower’, the fig needs to be pollinated to make its edible fruit. Whence does this pollination come? Sometimes, it is the very nestling of the fig-wasp, who ‘crawls into [the] female fig, where she starves and dies’, which causes the inverted flower’s blooming fertility. Thus, in a warped (and what Marraccini calls ‘queer’) process of regeneration, the critic-*as*-parasite is revealed as taking part in a somewhat natural cycle—of feeding, death, and pollination—by which the fig-*as*-art is given new purpose, and given the means to create new life, too. Muddying the waters between host, parasite, and the sexual movement and biology in between, Marraccini’s fascinating description of criticism does not necessarily paint a dichotomy of readerly abuse and material victimhood, but is more so testament to an ecosystem which in fact *requires* human observers and commentators. Her nuanced take on embodiment, desire and responsiveness as critical mechanisms—and ones which can crucially be *queer*—is one that has truly stuck with me, and to which I feel greatly indebted. Taking her words into consideration, I can forgive myself for my literary zeal, my painterly passions, the all-consuming manner in which I become obsessed with a corpus of text or image.

Did I look too closely at the Twombly, with too much longing, with too deep a gaze? Did I take a step (too far) to crawl into the female fig, and if so, where in the queer cycle did I fit? Did I have a right to see lesbianism in those roses? Did I border on the parasite then? Do I border on it now, as I write this piece about the experience?

It’s hard to answer these questions with any precision; the haziness might be the very point. But I do know that my response wasn’t as unnatural as the security guard made out. As an entanglement, maybe it didn’t have to cause so much alarm.