

## Emotional Preparedness for Sphinx

For some people there is no adaptation possible: you're either crushed or you're free.

These have nothing to do with painting, or they lock in with a cynical strain of graphic trompe l'oeil critiques of expression, gesture-as-language stuff that had its moment around 1997 and ended up (for now) an example of what it thought it was fighting which cuts the romance which is already weak from disuse, plus no one ever needs to type the word "Rauschenberg" ever again, not any more than we say out loud of women's sensitivity "hysterical" or "tubercular."

The actions are like the older ladies in the park doing tai chi, slow movements that look like drawing back an invisible arrow, and then some White Rabbit late late late i'm late for a very important —, and nothing in between. Already fragments, traces, every photograph is catastrophic, broken off like you found them somewhere but you didn't, she did, and there's trash everywhere, the verb tense of trash is "present," everything is equal in museums, all taken from somewhere else to here where it doesn't belong.

Do you belong here, is the world breathing you in, is it cool on your tongue and hot at the tips of your ears, are those two hands in love; the question of *how* empties itself at your feet. You kick at it. The negative of some images are what has been exposed so in the positive it's legible, what we can read has been reversed in advance. There's usually more of a plan than the artist needs you to know about. You don't need to know about childcare and breakfast and mortgages and new strange hairs, midnights, regular dawns, longing, belonging, indigestion, shifts, shifts of the work off-register from the 10-o'clock news.

Did you think of the big Sphinx in the desert at Giza or the little avid poodle-sized femme ones with claws and tits menacing up the bodies of soldiers in 19th-century oil paintings, or the sober smiling fist-sized stone friends from four thousand years ago?

It's the same root as sphincter. To strangle. Her riddle is not terribly hard but it does require humility. I like the old wonders, built from what was possible. The swallow painted on the limestone rock, 4 inches across, Thebes; scarabs and cats the size of teeth. Flaubert asked but how sad do you have to be to think about Carthage. Are you looking for love here? I am, sometimes, in the form of a skinny mirror, my ordinary griefs laid out with parades and lamenting angels and flowers and free nachos all around them.

There has been a plan executed perfectly because the dispute and fracture are built into the plan. Photograph is writing with light, photosynthesis is light as food, photophobia (archaic if ever) is being afraid not of images but of light. Graph means to write, to choreograph is to write movement. Telegraph is writing from far away. Interpretation of artwork can feel like autograph (neat!) vs polygraph (lies!) vs encephalograph which is an X-ray picture of your brain, a representation of somewhere inside you that you yourself can't see. There are many things in my life I have kept and refuse to look at. I hear them heaving at night in their piles. One huge photograph here is sprawled like intestines on the architecture, time unhappily but avidly made space. Lee Lozano said it, that "my 'heart' is in my brain."

We could stand to ask about what's beautiful and how. There is no stable record of the past, there's no how it was, take a second, millions of people for thousands of years gone without a trace, absent from the record, just not there, and instead we have Rauschenberg, Robespierre, Genghis Khan. Can you think of the unthinkable cool endless absence? Women having been invented coterminous with the camera in the 19th century look back for our names and come up with sand over and over and over because it's the sand we want and are. The leaves, and dust. We're that many. The dispute is with beauty and its enormous signals which look like wounds but are probably flowers.

The work is about who's missing too, who you miss, the marks they left on you; a wound is an opening. A bruise stays inside the body, closed, its color spreading slowly. Every time there's a factory explosion, a strike, a plague, another moment of unadulterated state violence, a miracle, a rescue, an air war, executions, sales, new releases, the work is about that. The work stays still and figures on this soft shifting ground. I wonder what will happen.

A paranoid read stays paranoid, it becomes how you read everything if you expect to feel the outside world inside yourself, if you expect to be caught or held or hurt or let go of or told you are not there.

An aporia, a terrible gasp and then silence and coolness forever. A person can be made to mean something, the terrain of anyone's face, the screen behind which for some of us, upon which, for some of us. Plato wanted artists struck from his ideal polis because it was just an imitation of an imitation of life, the ideal form we could never see behind us always, our use of the world just shadows, just writ on water. Aristotle thought artists were fine because art helps expiate difficult emotions which helps the state function calmly and without interruption. The harder the howls at Greek tragedies the better for keeping the norms up, safe. Art was bound, a line was drawn clearly around where the feeling was to take place, and still often is, but there are leaks and sometimes the work works elsewhere.

The other night across the street I thought this girl had lost her dog or cat. She kept running a few yards and then stopping, calling out a name, squatting to peer under cars, standing up and calling and turning around again, and I watched her from my stoop in the dark and after about a minute went over and asked if I could help but she said she was fine and I walked away and she went on calling, calling.

- **Dana DeGiulio**  
January 2023