

ORLANDO READE / The Hospitality of Ambivalence

You approach the work of art as if it were somewhere your body would enter. It appears to you like an invitation, having anticipated the dimensions of your life; you acknowledge this with the time and intensity of your attention. After the approach and before the turning away, there is a moment in which, having accepted its conditions, you are subject to its hospitality. The precise and mysterious discipline of hospitality offers protocols with which to comprehend the significance of a tendency in certain recent works of art—an ambivalence towards the person who would consume them.

Jacques Lacan says something stupid in his seventeenth seminar on psychoanalysis: “Seeing a door half-open is not going through it” (19). He is talking about transgression as the “sneaking around” of politicians and adulterers. Lacan’s word is *franchir* (to cross or leap over) and we may hear a pun on that particularly Gallic blend of honesty and self-righteousness, *franchise*, which is the real problem here: the transgressor does not avail himself of his desire with frankness (this demand has its own dangers, now that there are critical questions to be asked of the French appetite for unveiling). For Lacan there is no transgression or sexual normalcy, only *jouissance*, that fruity untranslatable, which we hoard up or may more profitably squander. He wishes to dispel easy claims about transgression in order to illuminate the possibility of an intervention in the revolutionary cycle of history: we should imagine, at most, changing “a notch.”

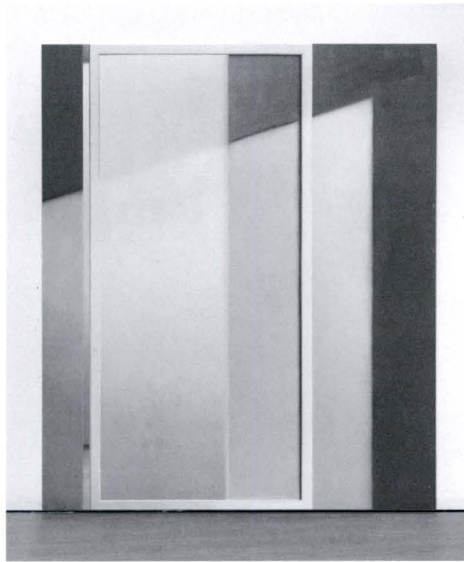
The unspoken invitation of the unclosed door is illustrated by an episode in Louise Bourgeois’s story *The Puritan*:

The trouble came when one of the doors was left open and apparently someone came in. Maybe it was an oversight or a mistake but I doubt it because this was not in the style of that place, nor in the character of the man. We might assume the door was left open almost on purpose, as a half invitation to someone passing by to come in for fun.

A puritan morality can only admit desire in an underhand manner; as Lacan suggests, only a puritanical politics would confuse this coyness about thresholds for an act of transformative politics. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch named

this frame *doorkijkje*, a door for peeking through, a device for sensational paintings. It is visible today in Amsterdam, in the undressed windows of the bourgeois neighborhoods, exhibiting their immaculate interiors. The half-open door is an invitation masquerading as indifference.

Some art-works do not appear to want your attention, they refuse the courtesy of claiming, celebrating their own autonomy. Their refusal creates an asymmetry in the structures of recognition that are the hospitality of art. Do you approach? Would you gaze at something that would not at least pretend to gaze back. We need to know if this apparent indifference masks a desire to be consumed, and where it signifies the desire for a different condition of living.



Christopher Page, "A Party in Seville" (2014)

"A Party in Seville," printed above in black and white, presents an entrance: a gap between the inner edge of a sliding door and a wall. It is open wide enough that you could place a hand, insert one eye or slide the door across and enter. Behind lies another space, disclosed in the gap: a floor and a wall behind, the flesh-tones of the floor grade from light pink at the bottom to brown at the top,

in contrast with the metallic blue of the wall, which grades towards whiteness at the top. The wall is illuminated by an invisible source of light that falls across its surface at an oblique angle. The edges of the lit surface are two gilded lines of a rhombus pointing towards the top-right-hand corner of the painting. The glass of the door is frosted, scattering the image of whatever faces it. There is nobody else in this scene of luxurious tranquility—you may be “the first” to enter.

If the space of this painting is designed to produce desire, like Lacan’s pseudo-transgressive door, this desire is opposed by other elements in the painting’s composition. The flatness of the scene appears to be a refusal of what Karel van Mander named *doorsien*, the plunging depth of a vista within a landscape, the folds that contain a painting’s intimate dramas. In the frosted glass, the floor hazes into peach and the wall is aluminum, sky tones. Its elements are taken from an ambient iconography pioneered by the industry of luxury. This space was inspired by an image found in the Google multiplex, recreated with architectural rendering software and then rendered unfaithfully by the painter’s hand. The painting delineates a space that appears to be inhabitable, following a sense of perspective transgressing its law; it is an impossible space, you realise, as you live with its dimensions for these moments. Approach the painting more closely and two lines appear in the glass of the door, as if reflecting a large rectangle where you are standing. Its dimensions refuse the hospitality of perspective and frustrate the logic of luxury. The painting’s ambivalence is issued in the same language as its invitation, as its reverse side. You are expected, you are denied.

Ambivalence, since psychologists first described it in the early twentieth century, has been marked by a conceptual uncertainty. Freud describes an ambivalence that is perfectly normal, and another, excessive kind that tends towards psychosis. The struggle between Eros and the death drive inaugurates this ambivalence, alternately the highest goal of civilization and an everyday experience in the city where indifference reigns. Klein has a reassuring phrase, *healthy ambivalence*, the state in which we conduct happy relationships, and another ambivalence that is defensive, pathological, splitting the love object. In the clinical setting, where there is transference of feelings (i.e. affection of the patient for the analyst), there is resistance or negative transference. This ambivalence structures the analytical setting. Laplanche & Pontalis say this word must be used only “in

the analysis of specific conflicts in which the positive and negative components of the emotional attitude are simultaneously in evidence and inseparable, and where they constitute a non-dialectical opposition which the subject, saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’ at the same time, is incapable of transcending” (89). This ambivalence stag-
nates, repeats.

Philosophy names this state of indecision antinomy, a pure opposition prohibiting movement. Into this state of opposition, the analyst risks entry into the arena, disrupting the patient’s patterns of self-recognition. *I love him, I mean, I hate him*. As soon as this opposition is sayable, its saying becomes the precondition for something else: ambivalence moves through indecision. If we can recover that other state from the definition of Laplanche & Pontalis could we call this not-unhappy kind of ambivalence by its philosophical name—dialectical movement? The coexistence of opposites here is not stagnant. It may be an accomplishment of stillness, to hold contradictory ideas in mind at once. “Stay there, stay there,” as Nina Simone once said. Holding someone at arm’s length may also be a protective gesture. Ambivalence makes space between bodies, a space without distance.

This ambivalence is also manifest in the experimental hospitality of certain poems. Lisa Robertson’s new poem, *The Cinema of the Present*—whose length, equanimity and internal diversity forbids its reader many familiar comforts—has at least one entryway. One figure is a gate (or gates), described many times in the poem.

A gate made of forceps and silicone tube.

...

So long, big doors, painted with sea light and honey.

...

A gate made of lamps.

The reappearance of a gate encourages us to approach. Could you build a gate with lamps? Your attention is drawn to the materiality of a gate and also its impossibility. Still, the gate is insistently there, insistently here on the page. You are drawn closer to the word, abstract and concrete. It approaches the status of an antithetical word: the gate admits, it inhibits. Is entrance ever achieved? These descriptions, in what Émile Benveniste called the non-person of the third person, are intercalated with sentences addressing a second-person:

You believe women exist.

...

How did you come to be in the vicinity of these sunken pools and chandeliers?

...

You carried the great discovery of poetry as freedom, not form.

What emerges is not repetition but a rhythm (which may be inhabited but never possessed, the reader hosted by poetry) and a dialogue between possible subjects, persons and non-persons. The pronouns of this poem cause us to question the conventional hospitality of language. If a different condition of living is achievable it is not a particular relationship of persons in the verb or a kind of spatial representation but a disposition of bodies. *Come closer, stay there, closer, closer, stay there*—this ambivalence now appears as a protective gesture, its indifference a strange kind of hospitality. The entrance may also be an exit.

Notes

I am indebted to Matt Rickard for the question of the link between ambivalence and dialectic, and for his comments on this text.

"A Party in Seville" (2014) is used courtesy of the artist.

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