

Courting confusions — visual art and text

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[art and knowledge visual remix](#)

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In recent years I have been making a number of works incorporating text, often in ways which might be regarded as contrary or perverse, for example a text in the form of a jpg, posted to the photo sharing site Flickr, about a photograph I decided not to take and a short movie about the city of Stavanger in Norway using Google street view images but eschewing the images themselves for a slightly poeticized textual description of them. Other recent works have included a series of 51 paintings incorporating apparently naïve textual self descriptions or reflections.

I describe and contextualise these works as artworks, led by my fancy rather than any research programme, but I also attempt to summarise some provisional lessons learned (or perhaps better and more modestly insights gleaned) from making them, about the relationship between image as image and the textual glossing of it, a question given particular sharpness since the rise of conceptualism.

To scaffold my discussion I draw on some of my own recent writing on questions of art and knowledge, Frank Sibley's classic contribution "Aesthetic Concepts" as well as a forthcoming paper by the philosopher Constantine Sandis "If an Artwork Could Speak" on art and meaning.

prolegomenon

In what follows I am going to introduce and meditate upon three of the text related artworks—one a digital image, one a video and one a series of themed paintings — which I have been making over the past few years and try and make some observations about how they might illuminate, in some sense, the relationship between text and image and the nature of each of these.

I will justify discussing a set of paintings in a journal devoted to matters 'audio-visual' on three grounds. The first is that paintings are unarguably visual, the second is that I regard my work, which straddles the digital and the material, as indivisible and the third is that the paintings would not have existed in the form they do without the precedent of all sorts of networked/remix/moving image related practices.

The three pieces might be thought of as 'stress tests' of text, asking it to do jobs not normally associated with it, or placing it in an unfamiliar or counter-intuitive context, though I want to insist that the pieces under discussion and their companions do not constitute a conscious 'research programme' of any sort. It seems to me it is not the business of the artist to subordinate artistic practice to this end but rather simply to allow the free play of conscious and unconscious mind, of the body, of feelings and interests in a sort of grown-up playtime, leading where it will. That's how these works came to be. I did not know completely in advance either what I would end up making

and whether the pieces would be aesthetically successful or not (and this uncertainty seems to me, following Sibley (1959) to be a defining feature of all art making).

What I can safely say is that the legion of ambiguities around word and image and meaning are things that interest and engage me—I have always loved puns, for example—and they have constituted an important part of my personal intellectual and affective formation, never far from the surface of my unconscious. Indeed it is precisely the possibility of their presentation as paradox or puzzle, that make them, for me, interesting as subject matter for art.

Leaving Sibley to do the heavy lifting for rejecting the possibility of articulating a successful aesthetic strategy before one actually gets stuck in and *makes*, I want to cite a second, for me foundational, notion about the artwork and that is the rejection of the idea that artworks—visual, literary, musical—have something that we can term a ‘meaning’ or even a set of ‘meanings’. For a long time I have felt this ascription to be a category error:

...works of art are not messages but objects. They don’t say things nor ask questions, nor assert, nor investigate. Neither do they as objects have messages somehow encoded or embedded within them. To assert otherwise is a massive category error. As objects they may of course be brought in evidence, copied, become conversation pieces, be described well, be described badly, be described perversely, be seen, be half seen, be missed, be lost, be found, be written about, point to things, be compared and many other things, some of which have not yet been imagined. (Szpakowski 2012b)

and I was pleased to read recently a more rigorous and lengthy setting out of a similar position by the philosopher Constantine Sandis (2017):

Neither understanding nor communication is reducible to the acquisition of new facts. There is a difference between understanding the words a speaker has said, and understanding the speaker—understanding the ‘why’ as well as the ‘what’. Wittgenstein states that ‘if a lion could talk, we could not understand it’, not because of any insurmountable language barrier, but because we wouldn’t know what it was aiming to do with its words. We need to free ourselves from approaching communication as something geared towards the transmission of information. In the case of aesthetics this involves a rejection of the supposition that the meaning of a work of art is whatever the author intended to communicate with it, and that to understand this work of art is to understand this meaning; an old chestnut in a new fire. (Sandis, 2017)

If artworks cannot be said to have ‘meanings’ then in what sense can they assist us in any project of clarification of ourselves, the world and the things we do in it?

In (Szpakowski 2016a, 69–92) I make an argument for artworks in general as creators of a very specific kind of knowledge, which I call ‘knowledge-with’ and I also begin to sketch a mechanism by which this might happen. My concept of knowledge-with is related to but not reducible to notions of empathy, fellow feeling and understanding what a thing or situation or person is ‘like’. I propose that this kind of knowledge is intimately and inextricably entwined with the aesthetic charge of any work. A term in the argument towards this is my attempt to show that it cannot be said that it is a necessary condition of being an artwork to engender knowledge in the form of true facts about the world—what traditional epistemology deals with, and what has been termed ‘knowledge-that’ (Fantl 2016). I will not recapitulate my original argument here. The interested

reader can find and follow it for herself, but it is important to mark the caveat that it does not exclude that as a by-product some artworks might on occasion offer us some measure of knowledge—that, an example being the use of artworks as secondary sources in history—how people carried themselves in certain situations, what certain institutions looked like, how people dressed for different activities &c.

Together these positions radically undermine any possibility of art practice as research in any sense analogous to how research in the sciences or social science is generally understood. I believe this undermining to be a wholly positive thing since it allows us to understand how art works might help us towards a different sort of clarity about things, people, practices and institutions in the world.

This will resemble much more a secular version of a *koan* (Fisher 1978) within the Zen Buddhist tradition than any increase in our repository of true facts. That is, a sudden realisation that ‘this is how things are!’ or ‘Ah, this is how things are connected!’. Neither is this sort of idea without precedent in the Western philosophical tradition—a preference for seeing things in their place and context over an attempt at scientific explanation can be found in the work of the later Wittgenstein, principally in the context of philosophy itself ‘Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain.’ (Wittgenstein and Anscombe 1989, 50), but in aesthetics too and also in relation to psychology and the history of religion (Cioffi 1998).

I want to make one final conceptual/methodological point. Elsewhere I have written of my sense of the artwork as not only the artwork proper but all the epiphenomena that spring up around it.

Just where and when is the actual art object? ...Think of the physical object itself at any point in time as the visible section of the iceberg... Or think of it as casting a penumbra in time and space; this, not the physical object but nonetheless inseparably of it. Object plus ripples—critical commentary, the references in other media: advertising, stand-up comedy, song; the popular image—jokes retold at work or in the pub, references to these—echoes of echoes... So we should think of the artwork as a sum over time: of all its moments, all its sources and all its consequences—and though this totality will never be accessible to any single human being it is nonetheless a real thing, theoretically observable and enumerable, not ideal or mystical. (Szpakowski 2010, 24)

It is my strong feeling—and its fleshing out requires much more detailed future argumentation—that it is precisely in this dialogic extension of the boundaries of the work and in this eclectic rag-bag of practices and responses that our ongoing engagement with and absorption of ‘knowledge-with’ continues to develop ie. that there is an inescapably social dimension to it. I will try offer some evidential support for this hunch in my discussion of the third work.

I will discuss each piece in turn by describing its format and appearance as impartially as I can. I will also talk about my own process of making it. I will attempt, too, to step outside my authorship and put myself on the ‘receiving end’ of each work. Because I am the same person in each case I will inevitably fail to maintain this distinction with any real rigour.

1. a photo I didn't take today

I was walking from Bethnal Green station down Cambridge Heath Road towards the Mile End Road with the eventual aim of reaching the Thomas Struth show at the Whitechapel (I'd become slightly hypnotised by the pattern on the seats of the Central line train I'd got on at Stratford and I'd missed my change at Mile End).

On the train from Harlow to Stratford I'd been taking a few pretty indifferent photos from the only bit of the window which now opens (at the very top, necessitating zooming somewhat in order to get an unobstructed view) and I'd put my camera back at the bottom of my rucksack.

As I was passing Bethnal Green Gardens (I was on the left hand side of the road) I saw two slightly dishevelled looking male figures, late twenties, early thirties perhaps, sitting together on a park bench. The bench had its back to me (parallel to the wall of the park on my left) and hence the two men were looking entirely away from me.

Park bench drinkers perhaps, nothing out of the ordinary. I continued on my way but as they left my field of vision (or my field of vision left them, more accurately) I noticed that there was a small CRT monitor sitting on the floor immediately adjacent and to the right of their bench. Almost immediately I took in another piece of equipment (another monitor, I thought, I think now it was probably the tower of a PC) protruding from the top of a light grey holdall immediately to their left. As this registered I had already passed them by and they were completely out of my line of sight.

I immediately thought that perhaps I should take a photo. There was something quite funny about the incongruity of the computer equipment sitting there by them on the bench, and a sadness too. My camera was at the bottom of my bag, though, and I would have to stop, fumble for it and retrace my steps slightly then hope that they had not moved (unlikely, they seemed settled) or that they would not be looking around them or, worse, turn whilst I was attempting to to ensure reasonable focus (for that is what one needs, I think, for something that would be a kind of documentary) and an ugly scene ensue.

So a certain cowardice and laziness played a part, but believe me when I say there were other considerations. I hesitated because I rather dislike images that are too gifted, too *decisive moment*. It smacks too much of deer or elephants doing cute things or a particular angle of the sun in the reeds for which I imagine someone being feted at a camera club or, worse, winning a prize on the BBC. I also felt the image was somehow too defined - my first (rather unworthy) thought was they'd stolen the gear and were reflecting upon what to do with it although even the most incorrigibly incompetent or optimistic of thieves surely could not expect any significant return for effort on what looked like a 15" CRT monitor from 10 years ago.

It occurred to me later they could well have been homeless and carrying a few old, random, precious and, in that light, pitiful, objects.

There was also the fear (tied in with the idea that this was an "interesting moment") that I might in some way exploit whatever difficulties their lives were in. I think I was wrong. I think the ambiguity of it all would have rendered the eventual photograph worth the effort and small risk and moral uncertainty (assuming I didn't cock it up in some way).

But I was now quite a long way further down the road, I had to get to the show and then do some errands before my off-peak travel card became invalid between 4:30 and 6:30. I regret my decision now. I don't often feel regrets.

Well, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention. The other one connected with images was a beautiful mobile phone video of the very sharp shadows (a baking summer day) of two birds, in ecstatically synchronised flight, taken in the park at Batignolles in Paris in 2008 which I inadvertently deleted as I examined my moving image swag on the Eurostar return journey.

This was chronologically the first in this group of text related pieces.

The facts of the piece are these. It consists of a short text which I wrote simply as a text, being on one level an attempt to describe straightforwardly and accurately something that happened to me and the way it made me feel. I wrote it in Word and pasted the text into Photoshop to create a 4×3 'image'. I even gave it a small black border to emphasise its existence in a defined format and space. Close examination of the image will reveal 'imperfections'—irregular left-alignment of the text, what appear to be anomalies of spacing, some incorrect punctuation—all easily correctible in a file encoded as text but frozen into place by the image—nature of the piece.

I then posted the 'image' to the photo sharing site Flickr under the title *a photo I didn't take today* ("a photo I didn't take today" 2011). The image posted to Flickr is 300dpi and approximately 30X58 inches, matching the high resolution original on my computer. This means that it would be quite possible to produce a good quality print at over a metre wide for gallery or other display. This sense of the physical potential of the piece was important to me in the same way as selecting a digital format—the jpeg—intimately associated with image files. I wrote above that on one level the piece was simply the description of something that happened and my response but it is, of course, much more. As soon as I began to write the question of style arose. I realised that to an extent I was channelling a favourite author, the late German writer W. S. Sebald, and producing a pastiche or perhaps even a gentle parody of his style. I opted to accept that this was the case and so I continued, consciously offering more and more carefully observed (or at least carefully recounted) minutiae,

much of which was not strictly relevant to the incident (or lack of incident) itself but which built up a perhaps slightly comic picture of me as a somewhat clumsy, bemused and indecisive protagonist. Towards the end of the piece I further picked up steam as I inserted a quote from a Sinatra song and finally turned a sharp corner into a short coda with a terse but (it seemed to me) poetic account of another frustrated attempt at imaging something.

I felt that this slightly over-keen embrace of literariness rendered the writing more ambiguous, perhaps to the extent of casting doubt upon the facts of my over-fussy account of the original incident, and that this doubt somehow mirrored or rhymed with the wilful perversity choosing to present the whole thing in a visual format on a photography site.

I dislike the word overdetermined. It usually signals bullshit on the horizon but here I feel I really want to use it. I want to say that I set out to make something that was as *overdetermined* as possible.

I very recently learned that the year after this piece was made, the photographer and writer Will Steacy (2012) published a book entitled *Photographs Not Taken* in which a number of photographers write about a photograph they failed to take for one or another reason.

I want to assert that despite surface similarities my feeling is that the two projects are qualitatively different. My assertion would be that *a photo I didn't take today* is positioned as a work of art and as such, in line with my initial arguments, carries no specific meaning and whose principle force would be aesthetic. This, with the qualification that I argued above that the 'aesthetic' is closely entwined with the kind of knowledge I have called *knowledge-with*. Clearly the presentation of Steacy's project as a non-fiction book (where texts, if you like, *belong*, or at least are often accustomed to find a home) means that its reception is more straightforward. We can read about the technical, ethical and other scruples of professional photographers focussed through the prism of images they had hesitations about. In doing so we might then feel we can take away straightforward lessons in these matters.

It is entirely true that the textual *a photo I didn't take today* contains references to some of these ethical and technical issues but they are contained, as it were, within the 'inverted commas' that characterise the artwork. A construct, a thing, not message or messages.

2. Stavanger Street View



agnus Lagabøters Gate er husene farget som deilige kaker. (Og i hvert i



The second piece I want to consider is a video entitled *Stavanger Street View*. I made the piece specifically to submit to a festival in Stavanger, Norway, where work was to be projected on outdoor screens in the city centre. I had never visited the town although I had previously visited Norway and I do speak and read Norwegian to a limited extent.

I decided to scope-out the town using Google Street View. I had used this as an input to artworks before, particularly for paintings, where I “transcribed” screenshots that particularly interested me as paintings, mostly in fairly thickly impastoed oils (an exercise, it might be said, in *translation*). I had also made a number of stop motion animations of my virtual passage through a place by means of Street View, the most fully developed of which is *Shit Happens in Vegas* (Szpakowski 2012a).

I suppose that precedents of both *a photo I didn't take today* and the Vegas piece were still somewhat fresh because their conjunction, in the idea of describing rather than presenting, or perhaps presenting-through-describing-in-words images from Street View that I found particularly of interest, came to me quickly.

I found several such resonant images (although, for some reason, I didn't take screenshots or URLs but remembered, with one exception, the ‘in-real-life’ addresses. I have not been able to find the location for the fifth, final section again.) and I wrote text about them in a mixture of English and Norwegian. Where my Norwegian let me down I used a dictionary or Google translate to fill the gaps. (I later asked a friend who is a native speaker to correct my text. She spent time talking me through her corrections so I could be sure that the final text corresponded as nearly as possible to my original intentions.)

Once I had a final text I created the video. There are five sections of text and each has its own title. The text for both occupies a line loosely along the horizontal centre from the top and bottom of the frame but slightly closer to the top. It is quite large, occupying approximately one sixth of the vertical space. The titles, both of the piece of a whole and the sub-sections, are motionless at the dead horizontal centre of the frame. The substantive texts move slowly across the screen appearing at right and exiting left and pass at a comfortable reading speed. Each text is divided up into subdivisions by two adjacent forward slashes. The texts resemble poetry both in their division into ‘lines’ and in their diction, which is heightened, though the vocabulary is simple. Once again I was mindful of the ambiguity of presenting a set of words which described (or related to) images in a format which would normally be used for something closer to what we normally think of as images.

Coming back to the piece, trying to see it ‘from the outside’ the first thing that hits me is the language. At the time of making the piece I understood every word of the text (since I had been through even the alterations to my original Norwegian in some detail with my language helper) but returning to it I had to refer to the English translation that I had posted online with the video (“Scenes of Provincial Life – Post #455” 2013). The stark and clearly intentional ‘designedness’ of the visual presentation elicits a frisson even prior to any attempt at understanding but feeling a degree of linguistic uncertainty reminded me what the experience of the piece would be for a non-Norwegian speaker and it became clear that understanding the words matters and is a key part of a full experience of the piece. (Something that is not always immediately apparent when one views work involving text in one’s own language, especially for native English speakers where so much of the world accommodates itself to us.) Nevertheless, the experience also led me to believe that the piece could be approached by a non-Norwegian speaker by carefully matching the English translation to the Norwegian text. This opens up interesting questions about what constitutes the limits of the work. Do we insist that properly it is constituted by the video alone or do we allow its extension into an accompanying translation? Would this render irrelevant or somehow artistically

offensive making a ‘translation’ of the piece as a new moving image piece, for even into a close language such as English this would alter its appearance and rhythm? Languages with syllabaries rather than alphabets, and/or with logograms would take us much further away visually, as indeed would languages read from right to left (or, as in some literary traditions, up-down). The further thought occurs that for those speaking English or another Germanic language there are glimmers of understanding to be had even prior to having an accompanying translation, in that a number of vocabulary items will trigger associations (and this understanding will be almost total in the case of Danish and near total for Swedish speakers — one could perhaps assemble a ranking of linguistic distance in this way).

Hus, delikat blomst, plante, døren, dyp, bakgrunnen, vindu, vegetasjon, tre.

There is an interesting supplementary comparison to be made here with calligraphic traditions in languages whose writing is constructed with logograms, where calligraphy has both symbolic and visual content and where the interaction between the two gives rise to an affective power which could be said to be more than the sum of the constituent parts. Here is Sturman (1997, 134-5) discussing an eleventh century poem attributed to Yu Xin and written in so called ‘wild’ cursive Chinese calligraphy:

This roller-coaster movement is emphasized by some noteworthy conceits in the calligraphy, especially the manipulated placement of the poem’s directional words to prompt awareness of the writing’s physical dimensions. *Dong* (east) begins the poem at upper right, while *bei** (north, part of Bei Zhu’s name) is found at the opposite end of the column. This can hardly be coincidental, since the fourth and fifth columns open, respectively, with the characters *shang* (up) and *xia* (down). Conscious intent probably also underlies the writing of the character *chu* (emerging) with a thick charge of ink that quickly fades into a paie *feibai* (flying white) effect in the next character *mo** (disappearing) at the bottom of the third column.

Of course the minimalist design on the page in *Stavanger Street View* is massively different in degree from the case cited above, but that it is a question of degree in the conscious visually oriented arrangement of symbols, and not a qualitative break, is underlined by Sturman’s subsequent observation that within the Chinese calligraphic tradition Yu Xin would be regarded as a ‘vulgar fellow’ and the poem discussed above ‘fit only for wineshop walls’ (ibid), and his further observation that the central calligraphic tradition discussed by him is much more a matter of ‘... understatement: characters play off one another through subtle balance, creating movement that might be likened to a stately dance’ (ibid).

For someone who does not experience the language in *Stavanger Street View* as a barrier in any sense, to whom it is transparent, I think there is, or, at least, *I find there is*, a sense of mystery, of strangeness, in how the language is both descriptive of quite precise images, enabling us to conjure up a mental picture of some definiteness, whilst all the while being aware that the relationship of this ‘picture’ to the *Street View* original (and indeed to the actual place imaged by the *Street View* vehicle) is highly problematic, not just on the chalk and cheese basis that one is an actual image on a computer screen and the second is a mental image (and the third is something of a completely different order, *a real place* allowing an infinity of possible imagings).

Let’s allow the deftest of court artists to make a serious attempt to transcribe the words as image. With the best will in the world this could not be but radically different from its ‘original’. I feel a strong tension between the different sets and formats of information, a tension arising from the fact

one must work to convert the words to mental image or physical sketch to replace a fully detailed image which we know to exist *somewhere other than in the movie* and further that there are an infinite number of possible ‘solutions’ to this. An added tension arises from the fact that all of this process is implied within a format, moving image, which might ordinarily be the carrier of that ‘lost’ *actual* image. A further layer of complexity arises when we consider the process, almost algorithmic, certainly one remove away from full intentionality, by which the original Street View footage was captured.

3. 51 paintings for children and adults



From 51 paintings for children and adults. Left: Painting #36, Right: Painting #14.

My final example is a set of 51 paintings, largely in oil and all on the same size canvasses — 14X18” (although the pieces vary in orientation) — of which I made the first 50 in an intense burst of activity between Sept 2014 and January 2015. They are entitled [51 paintings for children and adults](#) (Szpakowski 2016b) and were made with the idea that they might prove to be of interest to both groups. I conceived of them, almost from the beginning, as a single large scale cycle but I have exhibited individual pieces separately. With two exceptions they feature some kind of text— usually, but not always, capitalized—in addition to their image content, although ‘in addition’ traduces the process since there is no set location across the series where the text is located on the paintings. The text is painted on in the same materials as the rest of the painting, with varying degrees of prominence in relation to the image content ‘proper’ and usually in a way which makes it an integral part of the overall visual design. (I quite consciously had in mind Chinese and Japanese calligraphic traditions referred to earlier where the visual as well as the symbolic aspect of the text carries affective force.) In all cases my intention was to make individual paintings which were of a piece, where the viewer would feel constrained to absorb both image and text together as a unity and furthermore to flit back and forth between symbolic and visual ‘reading’ of the textual component. Having said this, there are pieces in the series where one could argue that the image ‘proper’ is dominant (and there are also two pieces entirely lacking text) and other pieces— particularly where the text occupies the greater part of the painting—where the eye is drawn first to the text’s symbolically conveyed ‘meaning’, though it is important to note that even in these pieces subsequent examination yields a surface full of painterliness.

The subject matter of the pieces was fed by my biography and interests, including my fondness for wordplay, my childhood memories and enthusiasms. The meaning content of the text ranges from simple description of its ‘partner’ image, to ruminations on/contextualisations of the image, to puns,

jokes and occasionally flat ‘contradictions’ of what we see. The texts are almost all in English although Russian appears in two pieces too.



From 51 paintings for children and adults. Left: Painting #29, Right: Painting #48.

I deliberately set out to encompass a wide range of topics and tone within the series. Humour is present—#48 lists the names of the days of the week vertically and in a right hand side bar the words ‘Those were the days’ is written vertically, a joke of sorts in English when delivered verbally, its freezing in ‘painting-time’ doing something further odd and teasing to it—but so, too, is high seriousness. #29 contains a verbatim section of an account by my late father of his trial as an ‘Enemy of the people’ in the WW2 Soviet Union and the figurative component is a rendering of a photograph of a guard tower from one of the Gulag camps. The final piece, #51, was made the day after the Bataclan atrocity in Paris with the simple text ‘I know that somewhere there is light’ against a dark background suggestive of a barrier or wall. An indecipherable symbol, resembling a started and abandoned letter follows the word ‘that’.

#14 offers a variant on Magritte’s *Le Trahison des Images* with an image of a pipe (here of the sort used for transporting fuel or water) together with the text ‘THIS IS A PIPE’. #43 is a loosely painted transcription of a webcam screenshot of countryside near to where I grew up, whose text is simply the webcam data for the day and time I looked at it and #36 is a reworking in oils of a drawing I made when I was six years old, with misspellings—‘a map of a robbery’—retained. #31 recalls an episode from Gogol’s absurdist short story ‘The Nose’, # 11 a late poem by Wallace Stevens and #7 places a small copy of Christopher Wood’s painting ‘Zebra and Parachute’ onto a gallery wall with spectator and the prominent text:

‘ON THE WALL OF THE GALLERY HUNG A STRANGE* PAINTING BY CHRISTOPHER WOOD *AND MARVELLOUS’

The interested reader can consult high resolution images of the whole series in the online archive referenced above but I hope I have said enough to indicate that the 51 paintings are intentionally heterogeneous in tone and subject matter and are drenched in appropriation, reference and remix. They look out into the world. They stir the pot. They confuse what it is to write, to speak and to make images.

I showed all 51 of them in early 2016 in a group show at the 20-21 Visual Arts Centre in Scunthorpe, UK. I was fortunate to have the writer Teju Cole write a catalogue piece for them. When he accepted the task I had no idea what would be forthcoming. I want to mark here again my scepticism about art and conventional knowledge and to underline my sense of the artwork as something with expansive and fuzzy borders in both space and time, for what did emerge was not theory nor description nor commentary but a work of literature that echoed the structure of my sequence, sang its themes back to it in variant forms and in a sense completed it (although further ‘completion’ is by my account entirely possible).

Cole’s piece is entitled *51 Thoughts for Children and Adults* (Cole 2016) and is a work of great density but also concreteness. The connection between his piece and my work is a complex and rich one. The 51 Thoughts... do not match, sequentially at least, the 51 paintings and their content only rarely includes an easily discernible address to a particular painting in the sequence which even then is dense, opaque and heightened:

6 Sometimes 6 is 8.

17 “Well?”: the ambiguity is ground-breaking

40 “Jailbirds”: More than a one-liner because, as we all suspect, punning lives next door to music, and might well be used for divining. (ibid)

There is great learning at play here—sometimes it feels as if a skein of careful links is being constructed from the painting sequence out to the world and to other writers and imagers of that world, mediated all the while by Cole’s humanity (by which I mean his being-in-the-world-as-a-human, not some vague compliment on his views or feelings or decency).

42 Félix Vallotton’s portrait of Gertrude Stein in 1907 was made methodically from top to bottom, as though he were lowering a curtain.

46 Toni Morrison said, “I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from.” But what is just as astonishing, I find, is to enter what one seems to already be intimate with.

34 De Chirico, after the war: “Every object has two appearances: one, the current one, which we nearly always see and which is seen by people in general; the other, a spectral or metaphysical appearance beheld only by some individuals in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction.” (ibid)

At other times Cole’s curiosity or interests or train of thought takes him far away from my initial concerns and he spins so far off into personal associations and recollections that I lose my sense of my own work, which is, I think, as it should be.

48 In one or other of the cities I know, I once saw children full of the light that their closeness to one boundary of life brings, and I saw their adults full of another light, the light of closeness to the other boundary of life. The children and their adults helped each other along, unconfused by the variations in what they knew. (ibid)

Cole’s text is a virtuosic exercise in tone and voice. Myth, humour, darkness, anecdote, the commonplace, ventriloquism, the list, the question... All these and many more are present. The

breadth of tone and address matches that of the painting sequence and that it is a sibling work only the most wilfully blind or churlish could deny, or that this siblinghood proves to be a powerful and fruitful way of apprehending an artwork. (I cannot, of course, prove this. I can only say: “Look, think, feel. Do you not sense this too?”) I take this as confirmation that my starting points outlined at the beginning of this piece are not entirely misconceived.

A concomitant of some of those ‘scene-setting’ positions is that not only is art practice a problematic instrument for research as generally understood but that the central core of artworks might be more resistant to scientific dissection or explication than many might think. (This is not to dismiss art history, a different kettle of fish altogether, with procedures that can be perfectly well be included under the broad rubric of ‘science’.) What Cole’s lyrical response to the 51 paintings suggest to me is that we might learn more about an artwork from responses that are themselves in some sense works of art. This suggests that the exclusion by the academy of journalistic or belles-lettres responses to work as somehow not properly scientific or academic (as in, for example, and altogether shamefully, in the UK Research Excellence Framework) in favour of a model drawn from 19th and early 20th scientific discourse, is mistaken or at least that it draws an entirely arbitrary line.

In his piece *Anti-Art as Cognition* (2005, 82) Thomas McEvelley argues that ‘...the presence of language within the frame of the visual artwork does not need justification; it is not a radical break with established art practice but reflects a tendency which has been present for centuries...’ He goes on to list examples, spanning the centuries, from the Western canon to which he could have surely added entire traditions like the Chinese and Japanese where it is the *separation* of text and image which is the exception. He argues that with the advent of the twentieth century it is simply that the foregrounding of text/image combination and interaction gathers pace and assumes a much greater prominence (and indeed, one might suggest, then presents itself for the first time as a problem requiring a solution) and in this he is surely right.

I want to note this because it is important to stress that the presentation and thinking through of three of my own works here involves no claim to pioneer status, to originality or even to aesthetic value (although this last would be the single judgment from others I would most savour).

Many artists have made work with a family resemblance to mine, and well before I did so. Hollis Frampton, in particular, stands out as someone who, in films such as *Nostalgia* and *Poetic Justice* from his *Hapax Legomena* (2012) cycle, sets up some of the tensions between word and image I have discussed here in works of signal originality and luminous beauty.

It would be interesting to develop some of the ideas sketched here in connection with those masterpieces, but that is for another occasion.

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All links verified 14.6.2017.

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