Susan Hiller, *Dream Mapping*, 1974, 3-night event, 7 dream notebooks, 3 group dream maps, dimensions variable (artwork © Susan Hiller, photographs provided by the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London)
NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Detail

Susan Hiller

We spend about one-third of our life sleeping, mostly dreaming. We share the experience of dreaming with all mammals and perhaps other creatures and life forms, too. Our dreaming self is organized on a different principle from our waking self and is just as much a part of us. In dreams we are completely honest with ourselves, but the series of fluctuating images we use to express our thoughts and feelings is unstable and ungraspable. The dream self uses what the philosopher Erich Fromm called “the forgotten language.” We think in pictures and we think differently, combining and recombining details in a creative way, putting ideas and emotions together as complex symbols. When we wake up, the dream experience is transformed into what William Shakespeare called “words, words, words.” Waking consciousness has no way of retrieving all the details of the dream because words can never be the exact equivalent of images. Words fail us. So the richness of our dream experience is lost when we try to capture it. But retrieving something, even a fragment, is better than not retrieving anything. Thinking about dreaming may immerse you in a vortex of philosophical paradoxes, enigmas, and conundrums that challenge fixed, conventional notions of “self” and “reality.”

At the beginning of the twentieth century Sigmund Freud published a book that brought the subterranean, aquatic underworld of dreams up to the surface of consciousness for everyone to see. In English, this astonishing book is usually called *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but in fact the original German title would be more accurately translated as *An Attempt at Grasping for a Deeper Understanding of Dreams*. The original title draws attention to an important process of “making-sense-of,” which is provisional and always in flux, rather than proposing a single authoritative interpretation.

Enthusiastic interest in dreams (and in the closely related states of ecstasy, trance, hallucination, and waking reverie) comes and goes in Western literary and visual culture. Fascination with dreaming, mysticism, and spirituality has always been followed by periods of reaction. In recent years reductive models of the human mind, in combination with some versions of conceptualism and some theories of postmodernism, seem to have driven most of contemporary art out of the depths. Personal investigations of inner psychic states by artists has been relegated to the margins of critical thought, while the principles of psychoanalysis have been misused in advertising and politics to construct all of us as passive consumers. Recent neurophysiological research is radically deconstructing not only commonsense notions of dreaming but also philosophical theories of mind, psychological and psychoanalytic concepts of consciousness, and anthropological ideas of cultural relativity. Yet the scientific account of dreaming is at odds with the details of what we feel “really” happens when we dream.

At the same time, what amounts to an uncritical obsession with the paradoxical nature of dreaming and related states of awareness permeates the mass media in comic books, television, film, and computer games. This popular resurgence of interest in states of altered consciousness is accompanied by thoughtful, more questioning work by an emergent generation of artists who are creating bridges, elastic locations where we can communicate with one another about the reality of certain specific sorts of insights. Such works revitalize connections to the unconscious details that are present in every aspect of our lives by giving them visible form in the collective social world.

In 2000 I curated and organized a touring exhibition called *Dream Machines*, presenting artists whose work derives from their experience of dreaming and related states of mind, those unstable zones where the visual merges with the visionary. Some of the works I selected for the exhibition proposed the possibility of shifting the viewer’s consciousness through visual means to induce revelation, sudden multilevel insights, visions. Other pieces offered routes to unusual states of awareness by playing with words and breaking up language so that signifiers float free of their signified. Others documented the subjective experiences of artists who had used themselves as guinea pigs or initiators of psychological experiments. And some of the works were ironic, even cynical, regarding the entire realm of the irrational. I see the exhibition as part of a conversation that has been going on for centuries.

Remembering and reintegrating dreamed material into my sense of myself, operating from the perspective of dreams, is an abiding interest of mine. I often say that as an artist, I’m committed to dealing with ghosts—overlooked, discarded, fragmentary details—focusing on situations, ideas, and experiences that haunt us collectively.

In this spirit I’ve produced several works that approach dreams and dreaming in a variety of ways. In 1974 I made *Dream Mapping* with a group of collaborators. I was and remain interested in figuring out how to capture something of dreams not as narratives or pictures but as diagrammatic or symbolic triggers that provoke detailed recollection and suggest the special way that time and space flow and warp and overlap in our dreams. I was and remain interested in how the dreams of individuals coincide.

More than twenty years after *Dream Mapping*, an invitation from the Dia Foundation in New York to experiment with the then still rather new medium of the Internet gave me the opportunity to make a multimedia interactive piece called *Dream Screens*. By that time I was committed to an approach that allowed the possibility—or even provoked the possibility—of recognizing those unconscious details that are part of every aspect of our lives and that haunt our society because collectively we refuse to enter into dialogue with them. Un-
derlying *Dream Screens* was my awareness of the extent that film and television have affected our dreams and the kinds of images we report seeing in dreams. The formal structure of *Dream Screens* is like a spider’s web, in reference to the World Wide Web, which in turn refers to the world of rhizome connections, the hidden pathways and routes that connect us unconsciously to each other.

Keeping a dream notebook, thinking about dreams, and making art that incorporates as far as possible insights not incompatible with what I’ve learned in the process convinces me that we benefit from reconnecting with the details of our forgotten language. Focusing on what could be called “the problems of translation” brings into visibility something politically urgent—the importance of developing a real sense of connection to ourselves and, through that, to other people, to the past, and to the realities of the social order and the consequences of history. We humans have achieved remarkable things through using our waking consciousness; these achievements have been at great cost and have failed to unify us as a species. We are separated from one another in every conceivable way. At the risk of idealizing an intrinsic human nature, it seems to me that retrieving, translating, and sharing the details of our “forgotten language” provides access to the understanding that, like other animals, we have a common awareness of what is real and an instinctive knowledge of what is good for us and what isn’t.

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**Spike Bucklow**

Details about the materials in works of art are often dealt with in a summary fashion (such as “oil on canvas”) or are overlooked. Yet without the artist’s materials, a patron’s wishes would come to nothing. Materials—which relatively homogeneous, like clay, or extremely heterogeneous, like television screens—are the physical foundation for all visual and plastic arts, the substrate for all color and imagery. For millennia, knowledge of materials was the ground on which all artists built, and it was acquired by hands-on experience through extended periods of apprenticeship.

Loss of the master-apprentice relationships in painters’ studios reduced Sir Joshua Reynolds to dissecting old master paintings in a vain attempt to discover how his predecessors achieved their effects. But as artists’ attention shifted away from their materials, some outside the studio became increasingly interested in them; by the mid-twentieth century, conservation scientists were having slightly more success than Reynolds in their investigation of old masters. However, the scientists’ methods and motivations were different from Reynolds’s, and the results of their endeavors can seem clinical and forensic—dry in themselves, perhaps of interest for the purposes of attribution. Modern science has created a new web of material associations—including isotope ratios in lead pigments and growth rings in oak panels—that would have been unnoticed or considered irrelevant by the artist but that now allow trading links to be established and paintings to be dated, among other results.

Yet focusing on material details can provide a starting point for reconstructing the original artist’s lost web of material connections. The *Art Bulletin* has published essays that treat artists’ materials in a manner that is far from clinical or forensic. For example, Fabio Barry has excavated layers of meaning from marble floors, and Michael Cole has shown how casting bronze can contribute significance to sculpture. These pioneering works demonstrate that raw materials and material processes can yield profound insights into both the artist’s studio and the finished product.

Today, marble floors and bronze statues are perceived as such even when the original understanding of their materials is overlooked. But when looking at a medieval or Renaissance painting, the modern viewer probably sees a blue passage as the Virgin’s robe, the sea, or the sky. They do not see a ground-up, purified rock imported from Afghanistan (Fig. 1).

I would suggest that the Virgin’s robe and the processed rock were perceived simultaneously by contemporary viewers because, for them, visual representations were not habitually divorced from their material vehicles, as they have become for us. Premodern artists’ materials were connected to their host cultures by complex associations every bit as intricate and nuanced as iconographic associations. And some now-forgotten material details would have been considered extremely important by the artist and his or her contemporaries, since the values associated with works of art emerged from both visual images and physical materials.

Once materials are identified in works of art—such as lapis lazuli in the Virgin’s robe—connections can be made and significance recovered. Historical patterns of use are not restricted to issues of provenance, trade, and the economics of luxury. They also involve issues of function, identity, and cosmology. Lapis lazuli may have come from Afghanistan, and the processed pigment may have cost as much as gold, but the stone and powder had medicinal uses and their reflected light touched the beholder’s soul. Lapis lazuli was believed to facilitate the answering of prayers. Indeed, it was the physiological, psychological, and spiritual interaction between the material and privileged individuals—explicated in cosmological terms—that accounted for the rock’s economic value and its journey from a central Asian mountain to a European painting. Yet cultural significance was not restricted to luxury materials or the specialist processes associated with them. Biblical imagery, for example, draws on gold, silver, and the refining process, but it also evokes wheat, chaff, and agrarian skills that harness the wind.
1 Lapis lazuli, rough stone, length approx. 2 in. (5 cm) (photograph © Spike Bucklow)

2 "Artists Colours Made from Egyptians Buried 5,000 Years Ago," and "Pictures Painted with Mummies," *London Illustrated Mail*, October 17, 1903, detail (photograph © Chris Titmus, by kind permission of the Syndics of The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge)
The master-apprentice relationship was a remarkably stable means of transmitting practical and cosmological knowledge about materials. The material aspects of artworks therefore furnish continuity through developing traditions to the extent that some pigments endured on painters’ palettes for millennia and Classical authorities are acknowledged in seventeenth-century painters’ manuals. Up to the seventeenth century, artists’ manuals had an empirical side, but they also had a cosmological side, like the bestiaries, herbs, and lapidaries that served as sources. Although the vast majority of artists left no record of their thoughts about materials, market forces and the stability of inherently conservative craft practices make it possible to interpret the material aspects of artworks by reference to popular texts. After all, rich patrons specified lapis lazuli rather than an identical-looking but much cheaper blue pigment because those who beheld the image knew the properties of many artists’ materials; much premodern cosmology was a commonplace, not specialist knowledge.²

Post-seventeenth-century artists worked under the influence of the Enlightenment, industrialization, and increasingly determinist (scientific) and imperialist (political) worldviews. These shifts had direct impact on materials in the studio, increasing the number of available pigments and changing artists’ relations with them. Of course, individual artists’ responses to the world outside the workshop varied, but, whether embraced or rejected, a work of art’s material nature inevitably reflects the culture in which it was created.

Today’s attitudes toward artists’ materials differ radically from even those of the nineteenth century, when international government-sponsored competitions were held to encourage development of a synthetic alternative to lapis lazuli (French ultramarine) and when human remains were plundered and ground up to make brown paint (Fig. 2). Archaeologists and anthropologists have long engaged with the material details of cultural artifacts. My own “work in the field” aims to facilitate engagement with material details in the history of art.

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Notes

Johannes Endres

Detail is a relational term, and the whole is its closest relative. An offspring of an antecedent unit, the detail’s justification was long rooted in a principle other than itself. The detail was conceived and conceptualized as the particular, the minor, the marginal, the remaining, or the typical, and thus neatly separated from but also tied back to its respective opposite: the general, the major, the central, the former, the type.¹ In such light, the detail always concerned both makers and beholders of works of art, even though its merely subordinate role for the bigger picture was hardly ever in doubt.² Characteristically, when the French term first appeared in the German language toward the end of the eighteenth century, it was in its plural form (as Details)—indicating that, first and foremost, one single detail by itself lacks significance.³

The emancipation of the detail from such subordination did not occur until the late nineteenth century.⁴ With authors like Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg, and Sigmund Freud, the detail entered the scene as an unprecedentedly prominent topic, gradually gaining autonomy from its various constraints. However radical and groundbreaking this paradigm shift might appear, its obvious connection to a concurring media shift is anything but coincidental. On the contrary, the new and exposed position the detail assumed in the works of Benjamin, Warburg, Freud (and others) emerges from a close—but also mediated—look at objects that were either photographed or filmed. The advent of the detail as a focal point of aesthetic and cultural attention therefore seems to be largely conditioned by new forms of technical reproduction.⁵

In the eighteenth century, the question of detail and its aptness and role in visual as well as textual media were already determined in principle. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s essay Laocöön, for instance, states that the representation of detail can be an objective of the visual arts only, while in texts “spatial details” dissolve into a linear succession of signs in time—and consequentially evaporate.⁶ Any text that focuses on the depiction of minutiae is therefore predestined to fail. Even nineteenth-century literary realism, in its programmatic sense, distanced itself from a mere portrayal of details, which was associated with painting; instead, authors strove to efficiently integrate the detail and merge it with a meaningful whole.

At a first glance, we find Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s use of “detail”—as both a word and a concept—no exception from such rule and custom.⁷ His short essay entitled “Myron’s Cow,” published in 1818, presents an insightful example of a classicist reconciliation of problems evoked by detail and detailedness, and their intrusion into the “body of art.” At the same time, Goethe’s essay reflects how the visual and textual arts respond differently to the artistic challenges the detail
conjures. Myron’s cow, a Greek bronze sculpture of the late fifth century BCE, praised by many authors (mostly from later ages, who had never seen the cow) for its unsurpassed naturalness and attention to detail, had long been lost before Goethe took an interest in it.8 No reliable copies of the work have survived. Goethe’s knowledge was based exclusively on literary rumors and ramifications. Nonetheless, in his essay he strove to reconstruct Myron’s legendary achievement from its “remnants,” in an effort similar to Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s famous Description of the Torso in the Belvedere in Rome in his eponymous article of 1759. Thus, details matter to both Winckelmann and Goethe for reasons of the object’s adequate depiction and its restricted material and visual presence. Yet Goethe did more than aim to relate the work’s remaining “traces” back to its original physical form. He also argued away its venerable reputation as a masterpiece of mimesis and emulation: “It was certainly not Myron’s goal to achieve a realism that vies with nature.” In light of the work’s precarious subject, its fame must have a different reason: “How then did Myron manage to turn a cow into an important and significant work of art which attracted and fascinated so many through the centuries?”9

Goethe’s answer is as original as it appears far-fetched to modern readers: “It was a nursing cow because only a nursing cow has significance. . . .”10—a witty twist, which boldly extends Myron’s design into the realm of fantasy. Interestingly enough, Goethe substituted the lost subject of epigrammatic praise with an equally hypothetical one, which takes shape in a detailed “ekphrasis” revolving around a literary conceit: “The cow, sturdy on her legs as if on pillars, provides with her splendid body protection for the nursing calf. The hungry young creature is sheltered as if in a niche, a cell, a sanctuary, and occupies with utmost grace the space that is organically defined by the cow’s body.”11 Goethe’s evocative description refers to the cow as an “adornment,” which makes room for the newly introduced calf and the motif of nursing—since only these can add naïveté and grace to an otherwise embarrassing and inappropriate topic: the detailed depiction of a cow in a classical work of art.

Goethe’s allusions to a variety of other art historical references (such as the Capitoline Wolf and representations of the Virgin lactating the Christ Child, favored by Romantic artists and utterly disliked by Goethe himself) cannot be pursued here. More pertinent to our question is the obvious skepticism with which Goethe treated the detail as a means of artistic expression. The minuteness of his own “description” corrects what he considered a false attention to detail advocated by epigrammatic texts; it redeems Myron’s cow from a long-held misconception. As a result, Goethe literally helped bring Myron’s cow back to life: his contemporary, Carl August Schwerdgeburth, in illustrating Goethe’s description (and relying on the cast of a coin Goethe mistakenly identified as Myron’s cow), restores a version of the antique image that disregards Myron’s invention to the extent that it resembles Goethe’s (Fig. 1).

Goethe’s text establishes a paragone with Myron’s iconic piece and its literary descriptions—a paragone that transforms the “representation of detail” famously ascribed to Myron’s cow by a formerly unknown “detail of its representation”: the suckling calf whose attachment to the overarching principle of life, in Goethe’s eyes, can free artistic mimicry from the lowering notion of dilettantism.

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Notes
2. The detail has a long and prosperous history, though, in rhetorical tradition—as diaeresis (a detail often overlooked). However, its reputation


10. Ibid., 26.

11. Ibid.

Carlo Ginzburg

*Détail*, like “detail,” its English counterpart, is a noun based on the French verb *tailler* (from the popular Latin *taliare*): to cut. A detail is something that has been cut off (either literally or metaphorically) from a larger ensemble. One might approach the relation between part and whole by starting from a well-known case: two small panels, representing, respectively, a city surrounded by walls and a castle on a bank (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena). Long regarded as early (and possibly the earliest) examples of landscapes in European painting, they had been traditionally attributed either to Ambrogio Lorenzetti (ca. 1290–1348) or to his brother Pietro (ca. 1280–1348). In a brilliant article Federico Zeri advanced the date of the two panels nearly one century, arguing that they had been cut off from a large polyptych painted in 1425–26 by Stefano di Giovanni di Consolo, nicknamed il Sasseta (1392–1450/51). Zeri dismissed the assumption that the two panels were independent landscapes as an absurd anachronism, comparable to positing a work by Piet Mondrian in the age of Tiepelo and Sebastiano Ricci.¹

As always, connoisseurship is art history in a nutshell. In order to identify a painting either as a detail or as a whole, one must take into account the historical process that, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, turned details into wholes, establishing new pictorial genres such as landscape and still life. As Ernst Gombrich pointed out, lost works from antiquity, of which Vitruvius and Pliny the Elder gave accounts, presumably contributed to the emergence of landscape; in the case of still life, the connection is more hypothetical.² But Gombrich himself paved the way to a broader perspective on this issue in commenting on a different topic: the development of Greek art, which he tentatively connected, among other elements, to the impact of Homer’s poems (we can only speculate about their competitors, since they did not come to us). Their vivid details—as, for instance, the description of a gold brooch with its ornament, a dog hunting a deer (*Odyssey* 19.227–31)—added circumstances (“how”) to the basic plot (“what”).³

To assume that Homer, “the best of painters,” as Lucian of Samosata retrospectively labeled him (*Images* 9), had a belated impact on painting (and sculpture) does not seem far-fetched.⁴ One might develop this line of inquiry by staging an imaginary dialogue between Gombrich and Erich Auerbach. In the first chapter of *Mimesis* (a book that, strangely enough, Gombrich failed to mention), Auerbach famously opposed two passages from, respectively, the *Odyssey* and the Bible: a long recounting of a hunt, elicited by the discovery of the scar on Odysseus’s knee (*Odyssey* 19.391–466), and Isaac’s sacrifice and its unexpected conclusion (*Gen.* 22). Two narrative modes: on the one hand, a slow-paced digression, packed with details; on the other, abrupt transitions, suppressed details, ellipses.⁵ Can Auerbach’s suggestive dichotomy throw some light on the development of visual arts in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy?⁶

The impact, both direct and indirect, of the biblical model, is obvious. Isaac’s sacrifice was the subject chosen for the competition that took place in Florence in 1401 to award the decoration of the Baptistery’s doors. The two finalists, Lorenzo Ghiberti and Filippo Brunelleschi, provided two reliefs that closely followed the biblical narrative, translating its few, scattered elements into a language derived from Classical antiquity (Fig. 1). In his later work, *The Gates of Paradise*, Ghiberti, the competition’s winner, evolved toward a decoration full of wonderfully carved, “Homer-like” details: a label that may be not entirely arbitrary, since in those years the Florentine chancellor, the humanist Carlo Marsuppini, was working at a Latin translation of the *Iliad* (Fig. 2). Although Ghiberti presumably never had access to that translation (which remained unfinished), a wish for Homer-like descriptions was a definite element of the intellectual atmosphere in mid-fifteenth-century Florence.⁷ But the role played by the Homeric model remained marginal and mostly indirect.

The aforementioned dichotomy, however, must be supplemented, in the perspective we are discussing, by Dante’s
Comedy, a literary work that was (as Auerbach himself masterly demonstrated) deeply indebted to biblical ellipses, as well as receptive to all sort of details connecting everyday life to the ultramundane sphere. The long-term impact of the Comedy both on art and art history is well known. It will suffice to recall the large number of illustrated manuscripts as well as the poem’s indirect echoes, either visual, most famously in Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, or verbal, as in Filippo Villani’s definition of Stefano Fiorentino as a “good ape of nature [di natura buona scimia]” (echoing Inferno, canto 29, line 139). Significantly, Dante’s parallel between painting and poetry (Purgatorio, canto 11, lines 94–99: “Credette Cimabue nella pittura...” [Cimabue thought to hold the field in painting. . . .]) is quoted on the very threshold of Giorgio Vasari’s Lives to convey its organizing principle: the notion of artistic progress.

But Dante’s Comedy also had a more widespread, and more elusive, impact. The poem is presented as a vision, and the verb vidi (I saw) and its synonyms are ubiquitous. Let us take a random example: the beginning of the Inferno, canto 21, showing sinners who, since they made money trafficking public offices, are buried in thick pitch. Line 4: “vedere” (to see); line 6: “e vidila” (and I saw it); line 19, “I’ vedea lei, ma non vedea in essa” (It I saw, but in it I saw nothing); line 22: “fisamente mirava” (while I was gazing fixedly); line 23: “Guarda, guarda!” (Watch out, watch out!); line 26: “di veder” (to see); line 28: “per veder” (he looks back); line 29: “e vidi” (I saw).7 Dante shared with his readers a series of extraordinary visual experiences, from the most earthly to the supernatural. Among them, fragments of landscapes, incrustated in the poem’s imposing structure and evoked in unforgettable lines: “Come ’l ramarro sotto la gran fersa/de’ di canicular, cangiando sepe,/folgore par se la via attraversa” (As the lizard under the great scourge of the dog days, darting from hedge to hedge, seems a lightning-flash, if it crosses the way) (Inferno, canto 25, lines 79–81); “L’alba vinceva l’ora mattutina/che fuggia innanzi, sı che di lon- tano/conobbi il tremolar de la marina” (The dawn was vanquishing the matin hour which fled before it, so that I recognized from afar the trembling of the sea) (Purgatorio, canto 1, lines 115–17).8 And so on.

In his splendid book Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy, Michael Baxandall argued that the perception and appreciation of quattrocento paintings relied on social
experiences, such as dancing or listening to sermons, that the audiences shared with the painter.

Reading Dante’s *Comedy* was also a shared social experience, which trained generations of beholders to look at paintings based on details turned into wholes—paintings that had not yet been painted.

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Notes

Many thanks to Maria Luisa Catoni for her pointed comments (which I only partially accepted).


8. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 3 *Purgatorio* (1753). See also *par tremolando matutina stella* (as seems the tremulous morning star) (*Purgatorio*, canto 12, line 90); both lines, reworking Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.9: “splendet tremulo sub lumine pontus” (the sea glitters beneath her [the Moon’s] dancing beams; trans. Henry Rushton Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library, vols. 63–64) and Ovid, *Hercules* 11.75: “mare fit tremulum tenui cum stringit in aura” (as the sea is set


Joan Kee

Scale, or the relative proportions of an object, place, or person, is among the most obvious and therefore overlooked details. Often mistaken as size, scale is usually invoked as a means by which to discuss the symbolic and, occasionally, the affective implications of being excessively large or small. Yet, even more than other foundational constructs such as color, line, or shape, scale directs attention toward the capacity of an artwork to respond to a specific location and place, while simultaneously calling into question the role of the viewer. Scale foregrounds the relation between materiality and meaning by its very refusal of arbitrariness; things are not a particular size for their own sake but are scaled according to some predetermined rule or standard of judgment.

The commentaries that emerged in the wake of Minimalism, during the mid-to-late 1960s in the United States, present a telling exception to the general suppression of the distinction between size and scale. In these writings, scale was taken up as a fundamentally humanist proposition, and it was keyed, inevitably, to the proportions of the human body.

Phenomenology became an appealing lens through which to explore this sense of scale. As it turned out, a humanist proposition was not exclusive to Minimalism’s fiercest advocates and detractors; it was also vigorously explored by artists affiliated with the Japanese group Mono-ha, for example. Nonetheless, scale has most often been taken up by critics associated with Greenbergian formalism, with the result that scale has been tacitly regarded as a concern specific only to a certain subsection of postwar Western art. This is unfortunate, not only since scale might help us better envision art history, without first having to consider geographic and national distinctions, but also because scale is here defined as necessarily correlated to the human body.

Works scaled according to criteria other than the human body have often been excluded or criticized. Very large installations made for a specific exhibition venue have been condemned as alienating spectacles, while official art made at the behest of an authoritarian state has routinely been omitted from mainstream histories of modern and contemporary art.
This official art often turns on an awareness of scale, sometimes to the point that the significance of the artwork depends less on its capacity to communicate a specific political agenda than on how it considers size: Is the work in question merely large? Or is its largeness intrinsic to the artwork’s efficacy as a visual image?

Consider, for instance, large paintings in China made after the People’s Republic was established in 1949. There, scale was deployed to emphasize art’s social and political implications. Predictably enough, the state mobilized scale in ways that made material accede to the authority of its constituents, and it did so by suppressing the existence of an individual viewer, in at least three ways. The act of creation was reframed as a distribution of labor across a large expanse of space. This recalibration was widely circulated through photographs published in magazines, such as *Renmin Huabao* (Fig. 1). Paintings were also made through a concurrent awareness of architecture. The extreme largeness of many paintings, such as Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue’s *This Land So Rich in Beauty*, is scaled according to the massive dimensions of structures like the Great Hall of the People. Here, if the dimensions of the human viewer matter at all, it is only to make the prospective viewer aware of his or her miniaturization, as we see exemplified by the Chinese and United States delegations standing under *This Land So Rich in Beauty* on the occasion of Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 (Fig. 2).

The state’s mobilization of scale was such that particular approaches to scale could have dire consequences, as it did for Shi Lu. *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*, nearly contemporaneous with Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue’s 1959 painting, *This Land So Rich in Beauty*, measures 93 3/4 by 85 inches (238 by 216 centimeters), large enough to correspond reasonably well to the galleries of the newly erected Museum of the Chinese Revolution, for which it was intended. Yet the work was criticized for making Mao Zedong look detached from the land, an accusation based on Mao’s apparent miniaturization vis-à-vis the depicted landscape, which appeared to exceed the artwork’s physical boundaries, and on the fact that it reintroduced somatic scale. Despite the painting’s ostensibly subject, the portrayal of Mao resonates with the proportions of an individual viewer standing directly in front of the work.

Scale thus meant proposing another view of the world, the state’s attempts at imposing its own worldview notwithstanding. This is particularly evident in the way in which some artists play size and scale against one another. In Pan Tianshou’s 1963 depiction of Mount Yandang, one of the areas newly consecrated as a key site in what the state termed its “geography of progress,” part of the mountain appears close-up and in detail. In the context of a very large support, this has the effect of making the mountain seem both inaccessible and accessible; that Pan chose to emphasize only what distinctly looks like a fragment suggests that the mountain is too large to be con-
Spyros Papapetros

Whether bored or amused during a day of his studies at the Art Historical Institute in Florence in November 1888, the young Aby Warburg drew in his notebook a series of ornamental flourishes and figurative doodles (Fig. 1). This ostensibly calligraphic nonsense acquires some meaning with the same caption written under two friezes with rhythmically repeated motifs: “Ein Haar meines Schnurrbartes” (a hair of my mustache).¹ The caption creates an abrupt juxtaposition in scale. What initially appear as decorative meanders, perhaps of a painted ceiling or a mosaic floor (which Warburg in fact describes in similarly embellished notes on an adjacent page), turn out to be no wider than a fraction of a millimeter, objects barely visible to the naked eye. Warburg’s scrolls invoke memories of haptic vision: the young student might have been caressing his mustache with one hand while replicating its texture with the other. As the future art historian embodied the act of magnification, his own body acted as a virtual microscope. Even if we can never be sure whether the young Warburg had in fact seen “a hair of his mustache” under a magnifying apparatus, contemporary advances in forensic technologies would make such self-observation possible. Images of human and animal hair magnified and drawn in cross section were reproduced in numerous contemporary criminological publications. Such scientific images reveal that Warburg’s visual analogy between spiral motifs and hair dissections was both acute and accurate. The proliferation of these curlicues rehearses the intensification of psychological excitation, but it could also cover the residue of mental fatigue. Perhaps the young student ruminated, initially, on ornamental patterns, yet gradually began to see hairs in them. Once the previously abstract shapes began to flourish with manifold associations, it is as if these inorganic appendages grew organically out of the spiraling scrols. However, the abstract tangle of lines underneath Warburg’s ornamental friezes may signal how details themselves can endlessly bifurcate, turning, thus, into a forest of knots that may never cohere into a regular pattern.

from the early 1960s and also based on Mount Yandang, was offered at auction in 2010 for almost $9 million. If the decision to scale things in a particular way represents an effort to assess one’s place in the world, then the question of the fit of scale still needs to be asked, lest the measure of the world be permanently connected to the market. How does scale fit into the world? Or rather, how can scale offer a different measure for a world art history?

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“Uns geometrisch auf ein Haar, beweist wie gross der Bier- topf war”: this is how Warburg’s German edition of Sator Resartus renders Samuel Butler’s maxim “By geometric scale, doth take the size of pots of ale.” Thomas Carlyle quotes the humorous proverb to satirize the excessive exactitude of German scholars, including his main character, the odd German Professor Teufelsdorch, a fictional character with whom Warburg nurtured an empathetic identification since his high school years.² The German translator added “one hair [ein Haar]” to the English original to make his version rhyme. This additional strand presents further proof that hair serves as evidence of rigorous precision. The ruler that appears in Warburg’s scribbles ostensibly serves as a sign of a similar pseudoscientific accuracy. Were one to pursue such allegorical interpretation, the stick figure climbing the ruler could essentially be a self-portrait depicting the emerging art historian about to hatch from his scholarly cocoon. Weaving the hair of his own face with the bristling hair of animals and excitable females in the physiological studies of Charles Darwin and Tito Vignoli, and finally lacing those undulating tresses with the art historical forensics of Giovanni Morelli and the windblown hair of Renaissance nymphs, the young scholar created a new historiographic fabric. What seemed an idle meditation on curlicues would eventually develop into a methodical inquiry on the resilient strands that constitute the genetic fibers of art history.

Fast-forward thirty-five years:

... the lecture itself ... expanded on a large quantity of knowledge, but in a manner that was somewhat disordered: the principal facts [Hauptsachen] are too heavily covered by accessory elements [Beispiel], and the important viewpoints are indicated only in passing by intimate archaeological allusions that only very few people in the audience can understand.³

However critical (and implicitly envious) Ludwig Bin- swanger’s assessment of Warburg’s well-known 1923 Kreuzlin-
gen lecture might be, it is perhaps the most accurate diagnosis that the psychiatrist ever made on his patient. While grumbling about details and thus himself missing the “principal fact” in the scholar’s thinking process, Binswanger implicitly acknowledged that for Warburg, accessory details are not marginal elements but central methodological apparatuses. Following Carlyle, the “main facts” (Hauptsachen or Hauptwerk) are clothed by multiple layers of accessory elements (Beiproben); this is how Warburg circumscribes the conceptual periphery of his subject, which the art historian describes by the term Umfangsbestimmung. Perhaps Binswanger was alarmed because, in too many of his patients’ dream narratives, he had already witnessed this bewildering process of inflating seemingly disparate details and transposing them from the periphery to the center.

But could the logic of accessory elements form the basis of a scholarly lecture? Perhaps the psychiatrist overlooked the fact that, in this case, the scholar was an art historian and that a similar inverted logic was already ingrained in his patient’s academic trade. The use of accessories as methodological apparatuses was ubiquitous in Warburg’s work since the writing of his dissertation, launched after his studies in Florence under August Schmarsow. Similar to Sigmund Freud’s series of “overdetermined elements,” ostensibly peripheral objects that occupy the core of the dream narrative (such as the small dried flower in the dream of “the botanical monograph” or the droplet earring in Dora’s first dream), accessories and other visual or philological details suffuse Warburg’s art historical interpretations. Details do not simply embellish the surface but structure the very center of his circuitous investigations.

Referring to its overabundance of “references and quotations,” Ernst Gombrich characterized Warburg’s dissertation on Sandro Botticelli as a “mosaic”—a lavishly decorated surface artfully pieced together within an architectural frame. The same metaphor also implies the required distance for the mosaic’s patterns to take shape. Without that distance, the viewer (or the reader) may get lost inside the myriad of
fragments and ornamental details embedded within the intricate texture and fail to grasp the overall design. Such a loss would also signal the empathetic identification between viewer and surface and would consequently eliminate any space between the art historian and the artwork. Once within rather than observing the mosaic tiles, one loses any normative sense of scale, space, and perspective.

Empathetic immersion in a universe of endlessly circulating minutiae might appear incompatible with a tectonic understanding of visual or textual space. Yet the mosaic’s reversed logic is part of an entirely modern mobile architectural framework. Envision an architecture of infinite extensibility produced not by the erection and division of large structural blocks but by the piling up and accumulation, rather loosely, of masses of peripheral details. One example contemporary to Warburg is Jan Toorop’s famous 1890s poster advertising “Delft salad oil,” in which a thread of hair redraws all human figures and turns the hybrid milieu into a forest of lines. There is no figure or frame in such representations: all objects are reconstituted by a single line whose origins remain unlocatable.

As Daniel Arasse has observed, aberrant details extracted from a painting have a tendency to disengage themselves from the larger picture and the more general context in which an artwork was produced. But one may also argue from the larger picture and the more general context in which an artwork was produced. Nevertheless, the same “mutilated” extracts also have the capacity to build their own autonomous and self-replicating environments. Think here of the fin de siècle interiors by Henri van de Velde, in which a linear motif crawls up from the carpet to the wallpaper and then wraps the furniture and finally the arches and other structural members of the building. The same minute pattern can be applied to a jewel, book cover, fabric, piece of furniture, and, finally, the facade or even the floor plan of a building. The buoyant ornamental detail defies both gravity and scale; it can contract into shallow surface or expand into three-dimensional space.

Details turn into autonomous plastic elements that can infinitely replicate in any material or size, as well as cultural or historical background. While turn-of-the-century art historians and connoisseurs would draw on marginal details to decipher the personal identity of an author (not to mention the collective identity of a race or nation), ornamented fragments can also be used to blur or even eliminate such distinctions. Such is the detail’s epistemological revolution led by Warburg and his contemporaries, which has remained with us ever since. We live and thrive inside a magnified world. That “one hair” of the art historian’s mustache springing from his student notebook is only a microscopic detail tangled within a macrocosm of coded information.


Notes

Adrian Rifkin

Two details from somewhere, destined to become substance in a text:

“[S]ome South American species,” Claude Lévi-Strauss writes of a type of bee in Tristes tropiques, “are not venomous, but they have a different way of persecuting; thirsty for sweat, they compete for its most ready points of emergence, the corners of the lips, eyes or nostrils. . . .”1

“Palma’s ear is large and rounded in form,” writes Giovanni Morelli in Italian Painters, “. . . and terminates in a pointed and well defined lobe; Cariani’s is also rounded, but has no distinct lobe; Bonifazio’s ear, on the contrary, is always long. . . .”2

I suppose, and I need to be as tentative and inconclusive as possible, that I have collected these two fragments, in which the writers detail a situation regarding a field of their work, because, once collected, their incomparability draws attention to a gesture with the face—for all that, without blowing up a storm in the ontology of the other.

On the contrary, their simple juxtaposition, which may well be at the beginning of some vast process of endless pickings and readjustments—an atlas, perhaps, as envisioned in Georges Didi-Huberman’s refiguring of Aby Warburg’s project—might also end up as no more than the draft of a new sentence. A new whole of kinds, that is to say, but without
any grammatical rule to govern its wholeness other than the “and then” of parataxis, and so, in a way, without detail, only nexthus or repeatedness.

The notion of detail and field or place of belonging fall into a mutual redundancy in the sequence form of a sentence made from parataxes. This is one reason why Didi-Huberman and others are right to draw ever closer together the procedures of Warburg with those of Walter Benjamin in their reading of a historical period. But also this is why it is better to think of these men as names without disciplines rather than as having disciplines without a name. Warburg and Benjamin, in the Bilderalas and the Passagen-Werk, quit the field that is detail’s place, which is the working up of the archive into finish. They slip toward what is finally inconclusive. Their names are of something other than what we once called an “author function.” Perhaps their names are for some questions concerning where—as well as when—is a field?

Better, too, not to hypostatize anxiety in the reading of the thing, the tragedy of the world, the catastrophe to come, because anxiety is not a method, though it may give rise to one, as may resignation and dandified desires for elegant locution. Let’s just suppose that a symptom is never a detail, because anxiety is not a method, though it may give rise to one, as may resignation and dandified desires for elegant locution. Let’s just suppose that a symptom is never a detail, but may be dwelled on as an affect.

The interval between the two phrases (not details) is, of course, temporal, spatial, disciplinary, and so forth, and while they have little to do with each other as we set them out, a certain comparability emerges from the forcing. The interval that interests me here, however, is neither the between of Warburg’s recurrence nor of Freud’s deferred action but rather the background, and the arrest of drowsiness out of which the images, or sentences, proliferate. The sentence-atlas is like not quite waking up.

(In a PhD seminar just the other day, DH remarked on what he called the “interval” in Aby Warburg’s Bilderalas as the dark space between the images. It is here that the other intervals of recurrence are mapped, and, in a strange oxymoron, it is the background that becomes detail, or at least the condition of its undoing; it is the figure of an uneven pulse, of syncope, random affect without being “punctum” in its nonspecificity; the interval here is the slide of “and,” the present image is more or less the epiphenomenon of its contingent visibility, weak enough and strong enough to stick and be passed over.)

So another stage in my accretion should be finding some “ands,” maybe borrowed from William Wordsworth, who used them so well: anaphora, integument of short- and long-term memory. On their tone will depend the color of the background, deep entrancing colors, silver-gilt or shocking pink. Whatever (shows up).

How might one engage with all of this in such a way that the detail will have become what we set to circulate, in our releasing it from a frame? A currency of kinds, a figure of or for what and how we work in the field, something neither quite an object nor a method, but a blank point (possibly like a sardine can), or an interval; or some other thing, more abstract—a blurred and dusted-over border between exchange values and use values, where the object of the work we do gets lost at the very moment of its definition; detail as a blur, as oxymoron rather than pleonasm (“notice the detail = perlocution, ideology”).

In any event, I do not envisage that what we call (the) detail will now become commodity, if only because of its resistance to generalization and its contrary aptness for reuse as the outcome of its being exchanged. This is to suggest that detail is what does not belong to a discipline as such and that in this it is something of an excess to the notion of a field or place of belonging, always more or less—than mere detail, that is.

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Notes
Joanna Roche

I could no longer recognize my world in the wreckage of those hours. Details caught my attention. Fragments that I was unable to set into a whole picture. I was too close or too far removed.

—Chantal Thomas, *Farewell, My Queen*

My interest in detail stems from a writer’s—and an educator’s—sense of urgency for specificity. Detail draws us in and anchors us, allowing us to expand into another state of perception, one where time takes on dimensions. At present, our access and exposure to visual information is both exhilarating and staggering. Daily visual experience is often lived in a useful, if detached, “channel surfing” mode of percep-

1 Joe Biel, *Veil*, detail, 2010–, graphite, watercolor, and gouache on paper, 55 × 145 in. (artwork © Joe Biel; photograph provided by the artist)
tion. It’s necessary to our survival—this ability to scan without getting distracted by details—but it is also crucial, especially in this culture of instantaneity, to foster the conditions of perception that details demand. “[S]ome things happen which one can only perceive with slow thinking,” writes Matthew Goulish.2 This deeper engagement with the visual world is often associated with “the art experience,” yet this mode of see-

2 Patrick Merrill, Masters of War, 2006, woodcut, 120 × 72 in. Collection the estate of Patrick Merrill (artwork © Estate of Patrick Merrill; photograph provided by the Estate of Patrick Merrill)
ing—the act of coming in close—is also a method of perception that gives us the scope to process the enormity of our circumstances. Moving in and stepping back is akin to breathing: we inhale detail, then step back/exhale to grapple with the whole. Two artists I visited in their studios, Joe Biel and Patrick Merrill, gave me the opportunity to examine large-scale works that summon viewers to take in massive, even obsessive, amounts of detail. These epic artworks are also worldviews.

Joe Biel’s twelve-foot-wide Veil currently occupies a long wall of a large studio-living space that was once a retail business on Chung King Road in downtown Los Angeles (Fig 1). This work on paper, begun in 2010, comprises 1,124 television screens, each bearing a unique image roughly 1 by 1½ inches. In the process of selecting the screens for Veil, Biel collected more than five thousand images from still photography, film, art history, the Internet, and television. He offers the viewer an overwhelming array of specific detail without advocating any narrative direction or focal priority. Clearly, there is a defined structure via the frame of the individuated television sets in their repeated, irregular stacks, but each of the screens is a distinct painting. Biel modifies old master techniques, using layers of gouache and watercolor over an underdrawing in graphite to achieve the luminosity of egg-tempera glazing. These hand-painted still images are unexpected, even jarring. We are accustomed to the constant motion and “easy” imagery of the televisual; Veil is fixed.

Equally meticulous is Biel’s method of collecting and composing the disconnected fragments that make up the threads of Veil. The laborious process of gathering sources and organizing the composition is an orchestration the artist refers to as a “score.” And it is a dark song: Iraq, Vietnam, World War II, Princess Diana’s funeral . . . Veil imparts a strong sense of structure, in which chaos is contained. Yet, like the woven object, Veil conceals some details while it reveals others.

Patrick Merrill’s 2006 print Masters of War, 10 by 6 feet, consists of four woodcuts printed separately and adhered together (Fig. 2). Here, we are confronted with another epic work on paper, except one that is narrative, even allegorical. Overtly political, Masters of War challenges us to take a stand on militarism and war. While Veil employs an open, antinarrative structure, both of these works are deeply populist in making use of recognizable form. However, the worldviews presented by these artists insist that we look closer, dig deeper.

The three warriors of Masters, modeled after medieval depictions of archangels, wear United States Army camouflage, their faces concealed by comic-book demon masks. Merrill’s prints, like those of his artistic mentors, Francisco de Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, and Frans Masereel, are steeped in the anguish of his time. “The innocents [the mass of limbs on the bottom] are naked, vulnerable, and modeled after the classic images of the fallen angels,” Merrill wrote. In the traditional dualism of Revelation, the archangels drive the demons down. Here, the relationship between those in power and those destroyed is inverted. The artist flips the good-versus-evil drama of Michael and Lucifer and leaves us questioning not just who is in power, but if there is a righteous use of power. Merrill borrowed Christian iconography to speak in a language familiar to Right and Left; he wanted his work to be a site of dialogue between the camps. The hovering protagonist in this and other prints is the nuclear explosion. For Merrill, this was the ultimate apocalyptic image and his greatest fear—the end of days brought about by the acts of man.

Stepping in, we can absorb some of the print’s detail from
the work’s central, oblong mass (Fig. 3). Up close, we see that the print is a cosmos of tens of thousands of incisions that have become an abstract symphony of marks and meanings, rather than a site of revolution. The mass of feathery cuts resolves into the cloudlike ground on which the warriors stand, their spears forming an inverted vanishing point into the confusion of twisted bodies below. This is an area of the print that reads like an accumulation of all the feathers (read tears, grief, sorrow) of the fallen.

The play between details and the whole in these works encourages our two-step dance. Stepping in, we absorb the minutiae of each screen of Veil and the abstract chaos of cuts that composes Masters. Both artists wielded the virtuoso techniques of centuries past, yet these epic works comment on our times: the active apocalypse of war and the passive viewing of the apocalypse as entertainment. The devil is in the details.

Nina Rowe

For centuries, the work of the artist has been idealized and the detail has been held in contempt. Remarks ascribed to Michelangelo denigrate the minutely rendered paintings of the Flemish, filled with “stuffs and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees.”1 In the androcentric language prevailing in foundational texts in the humanities, such paintings characterized by “external exactness” are said to “appeal to women . . . and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony.”2 Joshua Reynolds contrasted the fussy detail of the “ornamental” style to the “manly, noble, and dignified manner” of the sublime.3 Charles Baudelaire celebrated the artist who could “see things broadly and reject the “riot of details all clamoring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality.”4 From the Renaissance into the era of modernity, in the salons of Europe the detail has been associated with the finicky, the effete, the emotional, or the anarchic, while the whole was celebrated for a virile and rational coherence.

If the detail was denounced by generations of men seeking to theorize the work of artistic production, those engaged with the reception of art have perforce grappled with it. Deriving from the French détailler, a designation with the word for “to cut” at its core, the term detail is intimately bound to the fragment. And it is fragments of the past—architectural, sculpted, painted—that fill museum galleries, illustrate art history textbooks, and circulate on the Internet. Whether the art under consideration is physically broken or virtually dissected by the camera lens or the zoom function on a computer screen, art history is structured by the technologies of cutting.

Artistic fragments from the European past entered the public arena in the present by way of the military, political, and economic ruptures of the modern age. In the wake of Napoléon’s conquests and throughout the nineteenth century in Europe, as ecclesiastical foundations were dissolved, church treasuries looted, and noble collections dispersed, a new breed of dealer could break apart fifteenth-century altarpieces, frame or refinish the individual elements, and sell these pieces as integral objects. Well known are the quattrocento predella panels or German limewood figural sculptures extracted from their original devotional ensembles and offered up as narrative vignettes or portraits. Less considered are collages made up of cuttings from medieval or Renaissance illuminated manuscripts—the text discarded and the miniatures re-presented as independent panel paintings.5 Twenty-first-century scholars uncomfortable with such dismemberments and reconfigurations would do well to remember that artworks, canonical and noncanonical, have often only come before the eyes of the public on account of the violence of war or the quest for financial gain.

The breaking up of larger works by nineteenth-century dealers and collectors precipitated a new intellectual enterprise, connoisseurship, that focused on the artistic detail. Between 1874 and 1876 Giovanni Morelli published a series of articles outlining a method of attribution for paintings of the Italian Renaissance, many of which existed as fragments that had entered the market to satisfy nineteenth-century appetites for Renaissance panels. Morelli’s Italian Painters, expanded, translated into English, and republished in 1892, is perhaps best known for its illustrations reproducing tracings of the hands and ears in paintings by artists such as Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli. In Morelli’s amputated “characteristic forms,” the viewer was to recognize the touch of a given painter.6 The goal of Morelli’s method was, in part, to make democratic and systematic a practice that had previously relied on the numinous authority of the expert. But connoisseurship and the work of the authenticator typically continue to be derided in popular and scholarly venues alike, as modes that celebrate the authority of the expert and in which only dupes or the greedy could have faith.7

Calls to rethink a blanket censure on connoisseurship cast the search for attributions not as a quest for the individual

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Notes

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genius of an artist, but rather as a means by which to understand the conditions, tastes, and power dynamics that drove the creation of a work of art at a particular time and place. Regarded in this way, the connoisseurial enterprise can offer insight into communal ideals and the individual human’s relation to the collective. In an intellectual era in which broad consensus exists on the merits of analyzing the materialities of art in relation to politics, culture, and their attendant ideologies, Morelli’s method has the capacity to sharpen scholarly sensitivity to the fact that every detail in a work of art, placed consciously or not, is a mark of human presence by an artist grappling with the expectations and exigencies of his or her own day.

Iconography, the analytic method perhaps most deeply entrenched within art history, likewise orbits around the fragmented detail. The approach exemplified in Erwin Panofsky’s 1934 article on Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait effectively slices individual elements from the work, interrogates them for their “disguised” symbolism, and proposes a synthetic argument in which all the pieces fit together neatly to explain an interpretative puzzle. Among the many scholars who have enriched Panofsky’s approach over the years by recognizing the ways in which images and the motifs within them hold multiple allusions, Daniel Arasse shows that the iconographic detail and its material nature can exist outside a language of symbols. The detail might act as the point of contact between a dead artist and the living individual, as the element that arrests the beholder’s attention, sending a shiver down the spine in a moment of transhistorical contact.

Like the formal detail considered by Morelli, then, the representational one examined by Panofsky might bind a present-day individual or crowd to a person, a practice, or an arena long gone. The pressing sensation of the detail, the fragment that commands attention and can focus the viewer in an atemporal, sometimes melancholic, holding environment, offers up an exhortation. The art historian’s challenge is to make an incision into the visual realm of the past and to find the words to capture that experience of recognition.

Alain Schnapp

Most societies desire to persuade themselves that they are the products of a very lengthy past. The expression of this feeling varies from one society to another; Herodotus recounts with much humor how the priests of Thebes demonstrated the great depth of their past. In response to the line of sixteen generations boasted by Hecataeus of Miletus, the Egyptians invited him to admire their 341 “colossi” in wood, representing the continuous line of high priests that had presided over the sanctuary since times immemorial. Even Herodotus experienced this same lesson in humility presented by the Theban priests, despite the fact that he himself saw no need to claim any genealogy at all. Indeed, the historian’s discourse was based not on a theory but on a matter of detail: the Theban priests’ possession of a gallery of statues.

This is to say that there are many ways to go back in time and to account for the origins of populations and institutions. One way of considering the past is to cast a retrospective gaze on it, as Hecataeus or the Theban priests did, but another is to establish a clear break from it, to deliberately deny it. It was Pascal Vernus who first remarked on an Egyptian document probably dating to the eighteenth century BCE. In this short text, a scholar going by the name of Khakheperreseneb takes issue with the whole Egyptian tradition of devotion to the past:

If only I could have at my command unheard expressions, original formulations, made from new words that have not fallen out of use, that include nothing repeated, without orally transmitted expressions already spoken by my ancestors. I wish to cleanse my sentiments of everything that

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10. Such contact is explored in various ways throughout Arasse, Le détail.

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can be found (in that tradition), to break away from all that humans have already expressed to detach myself from everything that has already been expressed, for indeed, by its nature, that which has already been expressed can be repeated; and that which has been expressed will of course be expressed again. We should not take on the words of our predecessors as our own in order to pass them on as pertinent for our successors only so that our successors might appreciate their pertinence.  

The insight of this scribe, as Vernus interpreted it, goes against the very essence of the Egyptian conception of time: the scribe conceives instead a present that is not related to the past and a tradition that is of use neither to explain the present nor to predict the future. This cry of rage, this will to do away with the past, is completely contrary to a tradition common to the great empires of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. It refutes a tradition that enjoins society to imitate its ancestors and that considers, as did the Mesopotamians, that the past is “in front of us” and the future “behind us.” If anything, the attitude of our scribe seems to foreshadow an opposition between the partisans of remembering and those of forgetting. The latter camp is probably more numerous than one might expect, since it includes lines one finds an opposition between the partisans of remembering and those of forgetting. The latter camp is probably more numerous than one might expect, since it includes those who remain indifferent, for whom the past represents neither a moral duty nor an intellectual necessity. The contradictions of memory are numerous. On the front lines one finds an opposition between the partisans of remembering and those of forgetting. The latter camp is probably more numerous than one might expect, since it includes all those who remain indifferent, for whom the past represents neither a moral duty nor an intellectual necessity. The destructive nature of this indifference was observed by Victor Hugo, who claimed that the “bande noire” (property speculators in post-Revolutionary France) had caused more damage to France’s monuments than all the vandalism of the Revolution. Mesopotamian sovereigns so feared the destruction of their temenu, those votive inscriptions placed in the foundations of their temples, that the incantations they hurled against those who would vandalize them were as severe as those pronounced against the desecrators of graves. Sargon, king of Lagas, thus castigated those who would dare attempt to destroy his inscriptions:

Whoever removes this inscription, may Shamash tear out his roots

As violent as they may have been, such menacing terms did not manage to abolish vandalism and the destruction of the monuments of the past, be they through intentional acts or, as happened more frequently, through negligence due to absolute indifference. It is an inescapable fact, to which all despots and tyrants of all kinds must resign themselves, that nothing made by the hand of man is indestructible. To quote Simonides of Ceos: “even human hands can destroy a marble monument.”  

As violent as they may have been, such menacing terms did not manage to abolish vandalism and the destruction of the monuments of the past, be they through intentional acts or, as happened more frequently, through negligence due to absolute indifference. It is an inescapable fact, to which all despots and tyrants of all kinds must resign themselves, that nothing made by the hand of man is indestructible. To quote Simonides of Ceos: “even human hands can destroy a marble monument.” Hence the recourse to an alternative approach; rather than relying on monuments and inscriptions to ensure the propagation of one’s actions, might it not be more reliable to turn to those whose craft is to assemble words and polish sentences? Pindar already said that his poems were more resistant than the marble of statues or inscriptions, because their very immateriality protected them from all forms of decay. Likewise, the Egyptian poets of the New Kingdom claimed that their verses were more solid than the best quarried funerary chapels or the best mounted stelae. Horace’s notion of monumentum aere perennius (a monument more lasting than bronze) is not limited to the Latin way of thinking. One can observe it in Egypt, in Scandinavia, and, to go by the extraordinary excavation carried out by José Ga-ranger in the atoll of Retoka, also among the Melanesian communities of the Vanuatu archipelago, which have retained the precise memory of a funerary rite, by means of an oral tradition handed down over more than five centuries. 

Remains, relics, treasures: memory is made up of accumulations and rejections, of losses and rediscoveries, of material and immaterial elements. Victor Hugo celebrated the idea that, thanks to printing, no literary work would ever again be lost. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, on the contrary, celebrated the Americas, unencumbered by memories and ruins. Could we believe that? Humans have never ceased to rack their memories and to excavate the soil.

Yet, as a minuscule detail reminds us, by the end of the seventeenth century the soil had become a veritable history book. No longer satisfied with merely excavating it, the antiquarians of central Europe undertook to unearth the layers
of which this “book” was made, and to their spades and shovel they added a new instrument, the probe (Fig. 1). This modest probe, the first ever to figure in the illustration of an excavation (between the two figures at right), seems to announce a new era: “Archaeology: a new notion in Europe, a new craze. The past is saved, it is uprooted.”

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Notes
1. Herodotus 2.143.

Blake Stimson

It is nothing to say that art historians love details—of course we do—but it is something to say that we love them fetishistically. Just think of the last time you triumphantly crowned a classroom disquisition on Las meninas with the image of King Philip and Queen Mariana reflected in the mirror on the wall behind Diego Velázquez (Fig. 1). Or recall a moment of being particularly enthralled with the minutiae of an exceptional formal analysis (stretches of T. J. Clark’s 2009 National Gallery of Art lectures on Pablo Picasso come to mind as I write). Yes, our attention to detail is a form of analytic rigor, a kind of science, and, as such, just one element of our larger scholarly machinations, but we also experience details as a surplus benefit greater than such a technical characterization allows, greater, that is, than the pleasures given by other kinds of analytic detail work—that of accountants, say, or engineers, or maids. Spreadsheets, bridges, and tidy rooms can be things of beauty, of course, but generally they are so as the sum of their interrelated parts and, as such, do not reach that distinctive realm of experience that, for several centuries now, has fallen under the special heading of the aesthetic. When our details perform their magic on page or screen, they are more than mere components of larger sums, more than mere triumphs of artistic craft or art historical exegesis: they are glittering jewels, objects of libidinal cathexis unto themselves. This is what Erwin Panofsky meant when he said that the “very objects” we attend to as art historians are not made of paint and stone but instead “come into being by an irrational and subjective process.”

There are two types of fetishism, and we art historians have our ways with both. The traditional fetish gives us the pleasure of sublimity: a detail like an idol, crown, or relic expands outward from part to whole with the reciprocal relation between object and subject serving as anchor and engine for the welling up of shared being in God or King or Leviathan. As Michel Foucault put it famously about Las meninas, for example, the painting’s beholder and the blurry, shimmering image of king and queen in the background “reverse their roles to infinity.”

The modern fetish, by contrast, inverts this pleasure. Instead of sublimity, it offers us ratio and control, instead of the object opening out to subject, it presents us with the opposite experience of subject contracting into object. This is the existential pleasure, long familiar to us now, of sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism that is inherently iterative rather than accumulative—think, for example, of Andy Warhol’s 1962 diptych Marilyn Monroe’s Lips. Experienced in the ways that capitalist modernity invites, details like those in Warhol’s Lips provide a giddy release from the sublimity of tradition through the easy exercise of consumption. As plausible as that release is, according to Theodor Adorno, the most sensitive among us experience it together with an involuntary shudder, “a memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude.”

In one sense, it is easy to explain these two pleasures and thus to understand the prevailing double temptation of the detail: the older is the pleasure of submitting to and merging with a larger authority; the newer is the pleasure of power over things and people-as-things that comes at the price of lost communal subjectivity. As art historians, we conjure one or both of these pleasures daily when we inventory details that, on the one hand, mark power as a vertical, transcendent exception—crowsns and scepters, angels and putti, gilding, jewels, and fur—and, on the other, the mark the subsumption of power to our individual desire by distributing it through mundane, horizontal equivalence—stone breakers and courtesans, honest brushstrokes and automatist accidents, urinals and soup cans. Our enjoyment of either of these pleasures is always a form of collusion with the exercise of...
power, of course, but it is only so in a manner consistent with our age.

There is also a third pleasure proffered by the detail that is not properly fetishistic and, in a sense, not properly of our age. This is the detail that does not substitute part for whole in either traditional or modern ways but instead integrates part and whole in the pleasure of shared form. This sort of detail has long existed, even if it could also always be reclaimed and repurposed by fetishism of either sort. It was there in religious figures (think of how the mandorla or the Eucharist were used to conjure common cause, for example), in objects of secular absorption (the bubble in Jean-Siméon Chardin’s *Soap Bubbles*, say, or the aesthetic itself as an Enlightenment ideal), in figures of involuntary memory (such as Marcel Proust’s madeleine) and involuntary identification (Roland Barthes’s *punctum*), and in details that speak through their abstraction to the inbuilt commons of form.

This last about the “commons of form” is a large topic as fundamental as it is familiar. Paul Cézanne’s valiant struggle with “nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone” is an obvious example, as are the cubes of Picasso’s Cubism and the geometric shapes of Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematism. One testimony to the detail doing its work in this third sense can be found in Walter Benjamin’s 1928 paean to Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen*: Blossfeldt’s photographs speak to “the deepest, most unfathomable forms of the creative,” Benjamin gushed, the forms of “genius,” of the “creative collective,” of the “feminine and vegetable principle of life” (Fig. 2). Instead of generating the immense authority of an externalized god or king or nature, and instead of diminishing our authority by reducing it to rank power over things and people-as-things given to us by market relations, the authority that Blossfeldt’s close-ups presented to Benjamin was self-as-nature, self-as-god, self-as-king.

As distant as it is from the world we find ourselves in today, it is important to recall that the self Benjamin had in mind was not capitalism’s isolated, individuated, lonely self but instead the self of his beloved “creative collective.” The abstraction of cylinders, spheres, cones, and cubes, like that of madeleines, bubbles, and mandorlas, like that, in the end, of art historical details isolated from their original context, has always provided the language—the signs and syntax, the “feminine and vegetable principle”—of collective human self-creation. It is a matter of how that abstraction is seen, how it is felt, how it is owned, how it is venerated. Human autonomy is endlessly purloined as its wholeness is redirected to its parts, as we are redirected from the dream of enlightenment backward to the premodern past’s “estates of the realm” or forward to the postmodern future’s “nation of
No one would deny that photographic or scanned details are of immense value to art historians, both to our research and to our teaching. Details reveal things about art objects and they can be used in a scholarly article or book to demonstrate a point or prove an argument. Their power is even more obvious in lectures: a luscious detail—the lips of Ginevra de’ Benci, for instance—projected on a big screen before a room full of students or members of the general public can have a literally breathtaking effect. In addition to providing objective information or serving a rhetorical purpose, however, details deliver subliminal messages, and these deserve more scrutiny than they have received. Details offer a sense of immediate contact with the object that, while gratifying, can only be described as seductive, since it is not in fact the object but a photographic simulacrum with which we are being presented.

Most of us may have accustomed ourselves to the use of photographs and scans, and we may find details no more problematic than images of entire objects; we may actually approve of the way in which details—in a manner similar to X-rays or infrared reflectographs—permit us to see more than we otherwise might. More troubling is the fact that their “immediacy effect” is an effect of mediation, that they mask the experience, and they reinforce our tendency to fetishize both our visual relation to the object and the object itself.

One could argue that a fetishistic mode of engagement with art is entirely appropriate. Art objects have much in common with fetish objects: we might even say that the experience of art as art—“aesthetic” experience—is just a modern, rationalistic form of fetishism and that art history is just an elaborate rationalization of it. Contemporary art history might be thought to have contributed a critique of the category “aesthetic” and its legitimacy as a basis for art historical inquiry, and one of its ways of doing so has been to emphasize the fetishistic nature of art, yet the limits of this strategy have long since become obvious. We certainly do well to attend to the potentially fetishistic elements in our engagement with objects, but we must also recognize that our desire to reduce art to fetishism has less to do with critical rigor than with rationalizing and covertly justifying our own materialism and consumerism. Masked as a critical gesture, our insistence on fetishism is actually an extension of the very attitudes it claims to undermine, and art history as an extension of aesthetic fetishism works to reinforce deeply embedded cultural tendencies rather than to expose them to the necessary critical interrogation.

Sup tumorous details are an expected feature of expensive art books. A striking example is T. J. Clark’s The Sight of Death, published by Yale University Press in 2006. Clark himself calls the book “an experiment in art writing”; it features a diaries-like account of his protracted engagement with two pictures by Poussin. There are sixty-four color illustrations of the two pictures, including many details, many of them repeated several times: the aim is obviously to assist the exercise in “close looking” that the text sustains. Clark explains that “I want to write a reaction to my two paintings, not a theory of them” (82–83); “I want this book to be about what occurs in front of paintings more or less involuntarily, not what I think ought to occur” (133). Such an approach is justified, Clark believes, because Poussin’s pictures are not entirely “pre-planned” (30): as one looks, one has the sense of the “overall organization being arrived at in front of one’s eyes” (84). “He is a painter of patches, of build-ups, of accumulations, which are then, when necessary, touched and edged into life” (60). He is, in other words, a proto modernist, a seventeenth-century Cézanne. Concepts such as “inspiration” (48), “significant form” (109), and “less is more” (110) help to support the case.

The desire to see Poussin as a modernist leads to a predictable effort to minimize the relevance of contemporary textual sources and “period terms” (140, 150), as well as to insist that paintings are not “fully and endlessly discursive” (27),

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that “certain pictures look like language in order to alert us precisely to their unreadability” (175). “I believe the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it” (122). Although Clark tries to inflect this position, insisting that the visual is not opposed to the verbal but occupies a place “at the edge of the verbal” (176), he does not disentangle himself from the visual fetishism underlying his approach. Writing about pictures, he says,

should not flinch from making sense of the mute things it is looking at (making sense of mute things is a normal activity of language, and any patter about the special untranslatability of paintings misses the obvious point), but it should invent new ways for this explicitness to be overtaken again by the thing-ness, the muteness, of what it started from. (217)

One appreciates—along with the nod to Heidegger—the effort to respect what is most elusive to verbal expression, but the fact is that no description “starts” from the thing-ness of the object; it starts from within discourse about the object and objects in general. Clark’s phrasing encodes the nostalgic wish for an immediate relation to the object that it should rather be the aim of a critical art history to frustrate than to encourage.

Whatever one may think of Clark’s efforts at greater nuance, the effect of all the illustrations—all the details—is to undermine them, to underscore the mystique of the infinitely valuable work of art: indeed, they make the book itself into a fetish object. What speaks from the illustrations is not the object; it starts from within discourse about the object and positioned it in a place where we can see it as well as having brought us to that place. An essential element of that substructure is the value attached to the work involved, whether it be the work of the artist in making the object, the patron in paying for it, collectors in preserving it, critics in creating language for its appreciation and understanding, or the object itself in producing the effects it does. Fetishism—our love of details—might figure in such a history as an object of inquiry but not as a method.

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2. The problem is not just with scholarship that explicitly uses the word “fetish” but with much that emphasizes the origins of art in archaic impulses generally, such as the recent studies of early modern devotional art that derive from the work of Hans Belting. An example of where such thinking leads is Alexander Nagel’s claim that the Mona Lisa is essentially an icon in which the complex, expressive naturalism—“the art”—is simply a substitute for the ritual context in which icons are encountered: “Structural Indeterminacy in Early Sixteenth-Century Italian Painting,” in Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art, ed. Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate), 2010, esp. 19–25.
