The Poetics of Silence

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I've been asked to say a few words about this exhibition, *The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts*, but I don't want to.

Part of the experience I hope to evoke here draws a line between language, which is to say active contemplation, and being, which requires nothing more than your presence first and language second (or third). You know what being is. It happens to you all the time. You may be in a museum, or a public park, or sitting dully in your house, with "nothing" on your mind, and then there you are—a kind of walking phenomenology, language-free, but not feeling. In fact, you are suffused with feeling. Your feet are on the ground, and your body, released from the chatter of the everyday, is porous to the surrounding world with its various silences—a world where everything and nothing speaks to you. The clouds; some pictures on a white wall; a beautiful, hitherto-unknown sculpture reaching for eternity; that blank wall standing between you and the wonders of a garden that manages to grow right here in the middle of Manhattan—they all became part of your being, the self that is always on the verge of discovery, if only you can listen to its silences.

Silence says so much, if you listen. (From Marianne Moore's 1924 poem "Silence": "The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; not in silence, but restraint.") And since I have been a writer all my life, it's a relief not to think in words sometimes, and to look at pictures, which do not so much deny verbalization but are without language, only the experience of here and now. Sometimes being simply means that we are somewhere, and we are porous to contemplation. When we think about visual culture or production, words aren't the first things that come to mind. What does is the thing itself. And for this exhibition, I wanted to show what silence looked like—at least to me—and what words looked like to artists. The struggle to speak, to say, to reveal language or an attempt at language—communication—in a visual medium that has a complicated relationship to speech.

That's one reason Cy Twombly is here. He is one of the great disseminators and unpackers of language, of sound. In some pieces, such as *Untitled* (1970), the artist conveys the sense we have when language isn't yet working, when it is deciding what it will be before it becomes words. Elsewhere in the great artist's oeuvre, such as 1978's *Venus and Adonis*, Twombly takes the names of mythic characters to create a surfeit of feeling on the canvas, a bursting of love born out of history: Venus, the goddess of love, meets Adonis, the mortal lover of the goddesses Aphrodite and Persephone, and in antiquity, the ideal when it came to male beauty. But we don't see them—we see the words and we conjure up the images, while Twombly, much like the work he does in 1970's *Untitled*, provides a visual plane for us to traverse, to find our thoughts in, and to see—if we want to—Venus and Adonis.

And if we call Twombly a sound artist, might we compare him to, say, Wagner in his sweep and wrestling with language? And then Jennie C. Jones is our Mozart, delicate but nimble, a maker of surfaces that are deep in their implications about sound and what it looks like? She shows us what the rhythms of the soul leave behind—EKGs of rhythm followed by silence, or surrounded by it. Indeed, in Jones's work, the sounds wouldn't look as dramatic if they didn't rest in silence.

A long time ago, I read a book about the late Harold Pinter, our great playwright and believer in the pause. (This is when I reviewed theater regularly.) I don't remember what I liked or didn't like about the book, but for sure what I

admired about Pinter was his evocation of silence as a kind of grammatical mark, or pause, in the sentence of a character's life. Listening to the silences of his everyday people going about their business, dipping into violence, I didn't feel that I was so much in the presence of an artist who was using silence as a kind of style, for dramatic effect, but more someone who knew what a heart felt like beating silently beneath the chest. Brice Marden's work lives beneath the surface of language in that way. It's painting as language's subtext, deeper than "communication," or talk—a visual representation of what we feel in spite of what we say—whereas Rudolf Stingel's *Untitled* (2016) and Christopher Wool's gorgeous *Untitled* (1992) convey the energy of utterance, what we mean to say as opposed to what gets said. And then we say it again.

The implements of writing, the making of words: Vija Celmins and Claes Oldenburg find beauty in the tools that one uses to erase words and then make new ones. Blackboards as magical pages where thoughts and ideas are temporary, and can be ruled out and reimagined day after day. Words created with the help of machinery—then sometimes made into books—are remade as "real" art in Rachel Harrison's *Hermes 3000* (2021). And in another part of the exhibition, Agnes Martin's glorious silences shimmer somewhere to the left of words, or above them.

But already I've spoiled this by saying too much and not sticking to what I love about this art by saying "nothing." But there it is. This sense of being in silence, as sketched above, is related to how history affects or determines what others might call my curatorial practice, but which I describe happily as putting on a show—or making a context where artists can flourish, generally involving a historical context in which they can live and breathe. I have perhaps talked about this too much or too little, but even before I met my great art history teachers at Columbia, Molly Nesbit and Ken Silver, I was very involved in the act of remembering, which is part of art history's function, too: to memorialize one's thoughts as they relate to objects and time. This was not the difficult part of art history to me. The difficult part was connoisseurship. During the years I am talking about, the early 1980s, connoisseurship was part of the curriculum at Columbia, and while everything at the university was unfamiliar to me—it was an all-boys school then, and kids took vacations to look at art, and their parents collected things while the boys played sports—connoisseurship was the most unfamiliar to me. As I understood it, connoisseurship trained a person to become "especially competent to pass critical judgments in an art, particularly one of the fine arts, or matters of taste" (Merriam-Webster). I equated "taste" with money instinctually, and then the questions would not stop coming: What constituted a judgment when it came to art? Who established this taste?

Well, there were artists, and then there was the audience—the people who could afford to support them. Beyond that, I was unaware of the silent apparatus of dealers and managers and bean counters. What interested me were those queer curators, such as the late, former Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Henry Geldzahler and the ever-present Diego Cortez, who, respectively, made two extraordinary shows: The New York School at the Met in the mid-1960s and New York / New Wave at PS1 in the early 1980s. I am old enough to have been at the opening of Cortez's show, and I went with a friend who was involved with Jean-Michel Basquiat. New York / New Wave was a swirl of the high and the low and people I knew and didn't know. We were all just out of our teens. What I loved about seeing that show, and about reading about Geldzahler's show, was how each related to dismantling not only the hierarchy of museum culture—these were aggressively democratic shows—but the whole notion of connoisseurship. In each, the people who came to see the shows made the show, and the curator was the presiding artist but not the dominant one.

Now, concurrent with my understanding of all this—the democratic function in art—I met Molly Nesbit and Ken Silver. Each had a different relationship to the idea of "knowing." But what the former Yale classmates shared—they were both protégés of the late historian Bob Herbert—was an interest in the narrative of art: how one epoch led to another and how we were (how our eyes were) as alive to the past as to the present. Ken wore black leather jackets and was one of the first historians I ever knew who was alive to a student's possibilities. We met because I took his course Art of the '60s. I wrote an essay about Andy Warhol's portraits of Ethel Scull and Holly Solomon, in which I talked about gayness as a vision: Warhol had stained Holly's teeth to let us know she was a bad girl, and it takes a queen not to be afraid of a bad girl. When Ken handed me my paper back it was littered with enthusiasm: "YES!" next to one sentence, "OF COURSE I NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT THAT WAY" next to another. I was chuffed, of course, and especially when Professor Silver—he was not "Ken" until years later—called me into his office and said, his leather jacket squeaking, "Mr. Als"—we all used surnames then—"I could be fired for this, but: Are you a homosexual?" And when I answered in the affirmative, he said, "Oh, thank God!" and semi-collapsed across his desk. Was that connoisseurship? The ability to see what someone else saw and give it direction, while letting them know it had meaning for you? I had grown up in a family of women and was instinctually frightened of or distrustful of the idea of authority. I had been raised on welfare. Was this connoisseurship of other people's bodies?

Sometime after I took Ken's course, I asked his advice about a course on Marcel Duchamp that someone—a woman named Molly Nesbit—was teaching. Ken, with his usual enthusiasm, said: "Oh, yes! She's a wonderful writer! We went to school together! Wonderful, take that course!" So, I did. I won't go too much into detail here, but if Ken was my Dionysian Dad, then Molly was my Apollonian Mum, interested in fracture and the lie of completeness. She would have me to dinner, and it is incredible now to think: a twenty-year-old kid in a room with talk of Rosalind Krauss and Bob Herbert and Barthes and Lotringer and was this connoisseurship? The language of authority that was about the breakdown of authority? Time passed, and I ended up working in the art history department at Barnard, and the funny thing is that David Freedberg was the chair then, and he taught—yes—connoisseurship, which I could not face. I was the world's worst assistant. Molly had to talk to me about my never-less-than-an-hour-late attitude, also my lack of interest in answering the phone, my badly typed letters, et cetera. But she didn't put me down for this. She knew I was becoming or was already following Ken's advice, which was the implicit (silent) advice of her class, really: that there was no such thing as "authority," and that I could best serve my love of looking by writing about it—by becoming an author and not an art historian.

So, that is what you have now before you, a writer whose love of art couldn't come out straight, since what I love about curatorial work is what I saw so long ago at PS1 and read about or felt in Ken and Molly's presence: a breaking down of the old ways to include other people, a whole spectrum of them. When the estimable Jenny Jaskey asked me to do a season at the Artist's Institute, it gave free rein to what Ken and Molly knew before I knew: curating was just an extension of my writing. Which brings us to the second of the three exhibitions I made at the Artist's Institute. When Jenny asked me to be involved, I told her that other people are my art. Revisiting the installations, I can see that they bear witness to this. The show was called JAMES BALDWIN/JIM BROWN, but I think the presiding figure was someone you didn't see, a man named Darryl Turner, with whom I used to make installations. Our effect on one another was profound, not least because we were black men together in a world dominated by the idea of connoisseurship. Looking back, I can see that the three shows I did for Jenny were about heartbreak in some sense—the experience of loss

because of AIDS or poverty or fracture. Fracture and loss and subversion: that's what Ken and Molly taught me was valuable and could be articulated if one wanted to do the work. Making these shows, has it been connoisseurship or aversion to what James Baldwin called "the welcoming table"? Not everyone can be invited to the dinner party, so, like a director, I edit out some for the good of the whole.

Prior to my discovering that there existed serious academic scholarship concerned, fundamentally, with the relationship between historical experience, the artifacts produced, and one's perceptions as a scholar in the present, I had no language to come to terms with the museum images which stared blindly. I had yet to learn that a canvas, a photograph, or a moving picture might have an emotional resonance aside from one's emotional history—that, in fact, an image might move one to a reaction because the form or color might project an emotional resonance by virtue of the manner in which it is done. To see, one must possess a language that directs the eyes to what is being perceived. The language of perception, particularly of the black experience in art, is difficult to acquire. To be in perpetual motion backward, to be continually poised on the lips of persons discussing their then, is to realize a desire to relate the illusion of memory, based on their facts, to the illusory present. It is often difficult to understand now until it is past. The point is to enjoy the show.