TS 3-20.3.2025

WORDS DON'T COME EASY: Hilton Als on Language and Silence in the Visual Arts

TERRY SMITH

The power language has to make everything look the same, which is most glaringly evident in the *dictionary* and which makes the personification of *time* possible: something no less remarkable than would have been making divinities of the logical constants. — Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1931. 1

How might this read if seeing was the subject? Today, almost a century later, we might highlight the power that our immersion in too many visual images has to make everything look the same, which is glaringly evident in spectacle culture and which, by immersing us all in this imposed subjectification, makes the objectification of time impossible. We might even say the same about most museum displays, art history survey books, and many temporary exhibitions, where the narrative of Art History is taken for granted, or is too obvious. But not all. Some exhibitions evoke modes of seeing that bring out the power of visual images to make everything look different, and thus make the personification of time possible. Some may even turn the logical constants into beguiling mysteries.

The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts might be one such exhibition. Showing at the Hill Art Foundation, in the Chelsea art district, from December 12, 2024 to March 29, 2025, it is curated by writer Hilton Als, prize winning author, and long-time staff writer and arts critic for *The New Yorker*. Works from the Hill Foundation collection are augmented by many loans. A few masterworks by famous artists appear among a majority of smaller yet purposeful works by well-known artists, and a few by those less known. The quantitative quality question (otherwise known as connoisseurship) is, however, the least interesting aspect of the exhibition.

Much more interesting is what Als has to tell us (in fact, show us—this is an exhibition) about how works of visual art use language (writing in general and literature in particular) to show us aspects of our being in the world. In the elegantly produced exhibition brochure, Als's essay, "The Poetics of Silence," opens with this pairing. He

contrasts being as a relatively passive state—"You know what being is. It happens to you all the time"—with the "active contemplation" entailed by the use of language. Yet, "When we think about visual culture or production, words aren't the first things that come to mind. What does is the thing itself." Its silent autonomy. Its presence, self-contained yet resonant. His curatorial premise follows: "I wanted to show what silence looked like—at least to me—and what words looked like to artists."

The "at least to me" caveat signals that a highly personal perspective is on offer, its strengths and limits acknowledged in advance. "What words looked like to artists," however, is an objective claim, an art historical one if he has in mind the artists in this exhibition, or a claim about the nature of art, if he takes these artists to represent visual artists in general.

During a conversation in 2011, Boris Groys highlighted "a very general point about the nature of art exhibitions," arguing that there are "basically two types, each asking to be seen in a very different way": "One shows us a fragment of a traditional narrative about the history of art, while the other reveals a subjective act of selection on the part of the organizer. Everything we have to say about curating works of art into exhibitions flows from this distinction." 2 Whatever we might think about the absolute character, or the generality, of this distinction, there is no doubt on which side of the ledger *The Writing's on the Wall* falls. Als is explicit about this when he gratefully acknowledges the hands-off mentorship of two of his art history professors at Columbia during the 1980s: Kenneth Silver and Molly Nesbit. They helped him see that while writing and art—especially that about "fracture, loss and subversion"—were for him, academic art history was not.

Writing as someone who did take the art history option, including that alert to my experiences of fracture, loss and subversion, I will try to honor Als's literary, and visual, erudition as he pursues his pathway in this exhibition. While his approach resounds with personal experience, it also reveals aspects of the unfolding of several histories—above all, those of writing, artmaking, and theater in New York since the 1950s.

I could leap into a quick sketch, a buzz-through at the speed necessary to "do" most of the potentially interesting shows in Chelsea one Saturday afternoon. Given that I do not

have the art critic's deadline pressure, that would be a profile in superficiality, unworthy of Als's effort. I went back again, and put in time, including time to check online the unfamiliar artists and places. I carried with me questions I have been posing to curators for some years now. Beyond personal impressions, more than nuances to art historical narratives, what did you learn from the exhibition when done? What do you expect us to learn from seeing the works on the walls, in the sequence at which you finally arrived, when—after all the imagining, the planning, the practicalities, the compromises—the surprises materialized? 3

What follows a walk through my memories of the spaces of the show, from one piece to the next, following the curator's *parcours*, information sheet in hand, there being no captions next to the works. I will return to Als's essay, after taking you along on my own tour of the exhibition as he seeks to fit each curatorial idea into one of the given architectural spaces. His essayist's instinct has, I believe, generated ten "chapters." A writerly way of curating an exhibition.

I

In the first corridor, two concrete poems by Christopher Knowles are typed on to plain paper: one repeats the word "dance," jauntily, across the top line of the sheet; while across the upper section of the other the words "Chilly Billy" chug along, not unlike Bill Cardille's Psych/Rock chorus from the 1970s. Our sense of jerky motion comes to an abrupt halt at the third stop: an Agnes Martin page of a similar size, filled with grey horizontal lines, patiently ruled, which is only about its quiet self.

It strikes me that there is something right about beginning an exhibition about silence in the visual arts with works by two artists who struggled with, respectively, autism and schizophrenia. Even more so, artists who worked outwards from their isolation, with, respectively, extraordinary flair and exacting restraint.

On the wall opposite, a different energy. Irving Penn's black and white photographic portrait of three young people: Oliver Smith, Jane Bowles, and Paul Bowles. It is 1947, they sit around a table, perhaps in a New York club, the back wall ruled with lines like the paper used by Knowles and Martin. The three young creatives are dressed, and coiffed, to the moment. They stare intently at the camera, confident that their careers—

as a prolific set designer, a novelist/playwright, and expatriate musician—are taking off right there and then.

What fills the silent space across this short corridor? The sound of a typewriter. Of pencil and brush gently gliding along a ruler. But also, music. And lots of dancing. Guys and Dolls. In 1947, Smith was already codirector of the American Ballet Theater, with several famous Broadway hits to come, including *Guys and Dolls* and *Porgy* and *Bess*. The Bowles would soon depart for Tangiers, divorce, and pursue same sex relationships thereafter. Smith would rent his garden flat in Brooklyn to Truman Capote. The evolution of gay life in New York—and abroad, including Baldwin and Twombly in Europe—is announced as a subtext.

An understated, perhaps somewhat obtuse, but intriguing prelude.

II

As the corridor ends and the space expands back towards the street, we turn a corner to discover the first of several wall texts, an extract from a poem by Adrienne Rich, *Cartographies of Silence*, 1978:

> Silence can be a plan
> rigorously executed
> the blueprint of a life
> It is a presence
> It has history and form
> Do not confuse it
> with any kind of absence

Next to these words, two small chalkboard tablets are propped on a shelf. The word "EDWARD" is carved, roughly, across the top of the wooden frames of both boards, while down the right side might be discerned "+ M." Very faint traces of chalk remain, hinting at mathematical calculations. We think of their use by a child in a rural school, somewhere, some decades ago. We catch a glimpse of a bust of James Baldwin to our right. A young black child, wordless, but ready to write? To become a writer?

But before going there, why are there *two* tablets, both with the same name carved into them? Ah ha! One is a found object, a thing from the world chosen by an artist, and presented for us to sense its "aesthetic qualities"—a la Duchamp—or in this case, the relative absence of such taste. Yet, given Rich's warning, we see that this is the wrong road: instead, we are being alerted to an aesthetic of difference, one that values local specificity. Which Vija Celmins has here reproduced with almost total exactitude, to create a work, *Blackboard Tableaux #8 (Edward)*, 2012, one in her long series of such replications. 4

James Baldwin at 50, in Larry Wolhandler's bronze bust of 1975. Life size, yet evoking a death mask. Made in Paris, where a photograph of Baldwin staring at it was taken. It stands in front of the window onto 10th Avenue, presiding over the space that is shaped by the face-off between the Celmins boards and, on the opposite wall, Rudolf Stingel's *Untitled*, 2016, a 4-foot square slab of electroformed copper and plate nickel, dazzlingly silver and scored with graffiti, names, names of places or football teams or art venues (VENEZIA). Stingel typically installs metallic Celotex panels, inviting visitors to mark them up in any way they wish. At a certain point, he fixes the surface, then exhibits the work. (And sells it, usually for large sums.) The results suggest a dirty wall in a side street, or toilet, in Europe (usually Italy), blindingly white, a long way from a rural school in the South. Baldwin traversed such places and distances, not least to escape the racism saturating his native land, one part of which was being pigeonholed as a "Negro writer." 5

III

Completing this opening sequence, we turn to another pairing on a nearby wall: a 2016 etching by Christopher Wool and Sherrie Levine's *Flaubert: un coeur simple*, 1991. The Wool is a sketchy rumination on the several kinds of lines that might issue from a central circle then run along and against cardinal points. Very unlike his signature WORD paintings. OK, so the inclusion is perhaps a gentle reprise of the chalkboards. Or a reference to his sculpture of 2013, permanently installed in the courtyard of this building, visible at points in this exhibition but not listed as part of it?

And the Levine is an artist's book that replicates the style of Flaubert's original publication from 1877. In a variation from her usual, and once notorious, unmediated appropriations of other artists' works, she shows herself as the author, highlighting her act of appropriation by flagrantly affirming it. In the context of this exhibition, it is an instance of the visual artist becoming a writer, by showing this, visually, to be the case. There may be a subtext: Flaubert's tale is an exacting, exquisite profile of the misfortunes that befall a devoted servant in a provincial town. Sherrie Levine is the opposite of this simple heart.

IV

We enter a light, bright space, with floor-to-ceiling glass walls open to the street on two sides, an atrium between the third level and the fourth that we now see above. Large paintings hang on suspended flats, sculptures dot the floor. We sense straightaway that everything we see has something to do with writing, with the play between its implements and its processes. Are we in the open space of a studio, in a library without its walls of books? A study?

First up, a really droll visual joke. Rachel Harrison's sculpture, *Hermes 3000*, 2021. On a substantial dark grey plinth sits a Paillard-Bolex Hermes 3000 typewriter, vintage 1953 to the 1980s, pristine, seemingly unused. A polystyrene figure, larger than life, arises from a split block in back of the typewriter. Parts of its rough surface are painted pink, other parts left raw concrete-like, off-white, while others share with the typewriter its distinctive light green, "sea foam" color—although in a fugitive way compared to the baked-in coloration of the machine. The rising figure, a genie from the bottle, evokes the thought or speech bubble used by cartoonists. No winged-footed messenger this, utterly unclassical, yet still somehow humanoid, this truly awkward mis-shape is burdened by an oversized suitcase on one side, and empty spaces made by carboard boxes, since removed, on the other. The genie no magical powers. The messenger nothing to deliver. The bubble has no thoughts. The sculpture has no idea.

Or, perhaps, if you look a little harder, it configures an image of the struggle that every writer undergoes to actually have a fresh idea. (I mean, from where did this idea just

come? One answer: from my process of writing. Another: from writing about this misshapen figure.)

After the joke, things get serious. *Hermes* faces, points us towards, a major work by Agnes Martin, her *Untitled #20*, 1988. Six feet square, evenly spaced pencil lines divide its grey acrylic surface. A joke-like resonance: is this the (ideal form of the) sheet of paper which we might feed into the Hermes 3000? No, no, abstract upwards, dear viewer, Als pleads. You are looking at writing before it becomes an act: the clearing out of the world, the preparation of the ground, the readying of the sheet, the setting out of the lines, the placing of the implements, before picking up the pen. Or, in this case, the ruler and brush.

On the wall just to the right of the Martin, Als has placed his second wall text, from Marianne Moore's 1924 poem "Silence":

> The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
> Not in silence, but restraint. 6

This seems like an exact fit between word and image, poetry and painting. A little too exact, perhaps, as if the Martin were an illustration of Moore's lines—which become, in turn, an aphorism. Yet they already were. A saying in search of instantiations. In contrast, Martin did not set out to illustrate an idea.

… This line of inquiry is petering out, caught in its own one-to-one matching, on the cusp of regress. Is this an effect of the curating, or a blockage of mine?

To the right of the Martin, and within the range of *Hermes*' pointing, hangs a large, also "major," painting by Cy Twombly, *Untitled* 1970. I have never been a fanboy of this artist. "Underdone or overblown" (except for the weirdly interesting sculptures) was my takeaway from permanent display of his works on the upper floor of the Brandhorst Museum in Munich. And the Twombly to which I am most often exposed—*Three Studies from the Temeraire,* 1989-99, bought with much fanfare in 2004 as the personal choice of the then director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney—combines both unfortunate qualities. From this perspective, *Untitled* 1970, seems a rather obvious next step: a scrambled Agnes Martin; a big, high art, high end version of Celmins's little boy's

artless blackboard; a simple, if somewhat standard, demonstration of Writing Without Words.

The pace of the exhibition has picked up, we are now speeding through this wide-open space, leaping from one item to the next. As if we were in the introductory rooms of a museum of writing, a now lost art, yet which retains some residual fascination for some (the history buffs, the incipiently critical) among the multitudes who can now communicate by exchanging thoughts, which instantly and automatically enter the total data storage system, available to immediate recall, with no need of laborious scratching on rough surfaces.

Yet we have learnt so much from Als's curating so far, so let's pause on the Twombly and look more closely.

On a blackboard-like dark ground, several lines of white, word-like marks in chalk (white oil stick) swirl in self-circling motion. They do so in six rows, small at the top, growing larger, unevenly, to become double sized and looser at the bottom. As if the punished schoolboy began by writing "I will not…" but, by the end, was in open rebellion, again. *Untitled* 1970 is one of several similar works painted in that year, similarly untitled, each with a different configuration of rows, some with the circular shapes broken open into overlaid strokes.

In the context of this exhibition, two ideas body forth. Many people of Twombly's vintage, that of my parents, were taught to write according to some version of cursive script—every letter a variation on a circle and/or a vertical, arrayed along ruled lines, one below the other. Practice meant painstaking copying of each letter as displayed in a separate box, then freehand rendering of them into words made of flowing, connected letters. So, these swirls are marks of the yet-to-be-written. Prewriting, as in the Martin, yes. But something more.

An evocation of the physical act of writing as such embodied in its purity, of the *informel* state before words are formed? Yes, of course, but this feels like an easy lapse into generalization. 7

A picturing of the unspoken? The last words of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*? The state of our understanding of the world after the clearest possible statement in words has done its work? No, this would be another retreat to the studium.

Let's dig into this painting's temporality, the time taken to make it. The chalkboard ground is not a flat, even, one color surface. It is already erased, heavily and often, like an over-used blackboard. The wipes are random but also in rows. The subjectile is erasure. All writing is a constant process of erasing what you just put down by what we believe, at that moment, is a better, more exact word. Most of what you are reading now has emerged by my overwriting what I first put down. On a computer, and of course in a published text, this erasure disappears without a trace. Not, however, when it comes to handwriting, nor typewriting.

But *Untitled* 1970 is a painting, was always going to be a painting, and nothing else, so it is mark making, the visual artist's equivalent to word spinning, that is at stake. Twombly lays bare the erasure of layer after layer of marks as the enabler of the marks that come to count. Thus, the differing velocity of each line, its projective force from left to right, its unravelling as you read down from top left to bottom right—here, of course, Twombly does evoke the spatial logic of the school blackboard and the printed page.

"How to draw a line that is not stupid." In her recent reflection on the impacts of Parkinson's disease on her handwriting, Anne Carson, one of the few great poets of our times, reached for a question that Roland Barthes asked when thinking about the Twombly's artful artlessness. 8 One way is to resist one's own (refined, sophisticated, long practiced) touch. Twombly taught himself to draw lefthanded; these swirls are affectively a little more awkward than we sense they might have been. Nor are they dumb, in the sense of silent: we (metaphorically) hear the scratching of the oil stick as it makes its chalk-like marks. We hear the swish of the swirls. A slightly different sound on each line. We are learning that the visual arts have many ways of evoking sound, silently. And movement, while remaining still. (Careful, the studium hovers.)

Erasure is also the curator's takeaway from the Twombly. Literally. On a plinth in the center of this room he has placed Vija Celmins' *Pink Pearl Eraser*, 1966-67, a facsimile of a bog-standard rubber eraser, exactingly painted on to balsa wood, twenty inches

long. And on the wall nearby a 1970 drawing by Claes Oldenburg, *Notebook Page: Study for a Colossal Structure in the form of a Typewriter Eraser "Medusa*."

Hermes meets Medusa. Freeze frame. Love it.

The "chapter" is not yet complete. On a plinth at the far end of this space are four books that cannot be read. Made in bronze and lacquered, they are closed. While modeled on a specific book form, the standard Moleskin style notebooks with their heavy black covers, white pages, none of the four is a particular book. Yet they are shaped into two book ends, so are open to support any other book ever published. *Untitled (Bookends)*, made in 1990 by Steve Wolfe, differs in its minimalist aesthetic from his several other exacting facsimiles of books, most of them his own Beat generation texts, lovingly reproduced in all of their familiarity, their hand worn dust jackets captured in a contradictory fixity. Sherrie Levine redux. *Untitled (Bookends)* absorbs the idea of "The Book," and thus all particular books, erasing their particularity in the process.

As a curatorial gesture, this would seem to bring this section, the Scenario of the Act of Writing, to an end, by closing the book on it.

V

Fitting the flow of concepts into the given physical space is a curator's perennial challenge. Sometimes the conceptual mapping can only be finessed. The other works at the back end of the atrium space are shown adjacent to a wall text that cites a remark by Truman Capote made in 1967: "To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it is about, but the music the words make." Quintessential camp, a la Susan Sontag. 9 These words sound sweet enough but, in themselves, slide into cliche. For the exhibition, they presage the next conceptual space: the presence of sound inside visual art's silences.

Placed next to Jennie C. Jones's *Fluid Red Tone (in the break)*, 2022, they point us toward thinking twice about a work that, from a distance, looks like a 1960s color field painting. Two intense yet closely valued reds are matched on slightly differently shaped stretchers. Seemingly, a straight up modernist pairing of material elements: content is form. Again. Yawn. Yet, when we recall Jones's work as a sound artist over the past

decade or so, a more contemporary purpose is evident: less internal, more environmental. By saturating a section of architectural felt with scarlet red acrylic, and the acoustic panel with cooler red, the ground works to absorb color in parallel to its usual function in an architectural setting, which is to absorb sound. 10

We are reminded, elegantly, warmly, that absorbing is another kind of erasure, one very relevant to the experience of listening to music. Risking my own collapse into cliché, I want to say that the miracle of music is that it moves, and moves us, by accumulating what we have heard into what we are hearing just now. For composer and listener alike, it is self-replenishing well. Like writing and reading a book.

A step further, signaled by Jones's subtitle. Absorbing music *in the break* is, in Black musical parlance, to be totally into improvised music, to be at one with it, accepted by its flow, immersed in its possibilities, going where it is going. 11

A more conventional curator would interpose somewhere here one or two score drawings by composer, mathematician, and architect Iannis Xenakis, or an example of John Cage's books of prints generated by chance. And, when it comes to sound art immersed in the materials of writing and music making, where is Christian Marclay, especially his masterful videos about the temporalities of making music? Too noisy?

Instead, two untitled 2008 lithographs by David Salle bring us back to the conjunction of words and images, writing and seeing, that is the more obvious beat of this exhibition. In 2023, Salle curated a show in these spaces entitled *Beautiful, Vivid, Self-Contained*, dedicated to the memory of writer Janet Malcolm, and devoted to his signature concern: juxtaposition. These two lithographs are lowkey examples of his long preoccupation with the imagery of spectacle, with revisiting Pop Art, and mashing art historical precedent, often through cartoon-like exchanges between talking figures, *New Yorker* style. In one of these prints, two ravishing legs, crossed beneath a flared skirt, bisect a publication from The English Language Institute. Echoed in Italian. In bright yellow paint below, a word ending in T comes to an abrupt !

Works by Ecuadorian artist Ronny Quevedo guide us past the dividing wall on which Jones' painting hangs into a space that echoes and amplifies the experiences we have just had. His *body and soul (Reflection Eternal)*, 2022, continues a 2019 series *Traces of*

a Seamstress, in which he takes as his ground the pattern papers used to cut cloth—for outfits such as Zoot Suits, or Vogue jackets, or those offered by McCalls—merges them with layers of muslin, saturates the surfaces with gold leaf, then draws elaborate, abstract figures on them. We are being shown, convincingly, that the mundane, the heavily worked (by working women), has its own holiness.

We come to know this very quickly, and more expansively, from the work hanging opposite, arguably the major work in the show (so far, certainly), Ellen Gallagher's *DeLuxe*, 2004-2005. Around seven feet high by fourteen feet wide, *DeLuxe* is, as the caption states, a "Grid of 60 photogravure, etching, aquatint and drypoint with lithography, screenprint, embossing, tattoo-machine engraving; some with additions of plasticine, watercolor, pomade and toy eyeballs." Decades of text and images from magazines directed at African American readers such as *Ebony*, *Elephant*, and *Our World*, mostly advertisements but also some celebrity features and news stories, are carefully reworked and subtly subverted. MoMA's description reads:

> In a deft commentary on race, racism, and cultural identity, *DeLuxe* addresses the complex role hair plays in African and African American culture: it is a means of ornament, adornment, and personal expression; a signifier of cultural identity and difference; and a talisman for both strength and protection. 12

Hair? The modernist grid, embodied in Sol LeWitt style white frames, is filled with Blak activity of many kinds. Hair, yes indeed: Super Strut Afros, if you will. But also bodies, faces, skin—advertisements for whitening creams are smeared with a cream that turns blue or yellow; cures become crustaceans, or wondrous headdresses. Faked dreams are shown to be fake, yet the power of these women's dreaming is strong enough to absorb it. Women working with cosmetic substances to change the appearance given to them by the advertisers. To use these raw materials to create fantasy women, fantastical women, free women. Wakanda prefigured.

Great as this is, where have the main themes of the exhibition gone? What has happened to writing, and to sound? Gallagher's accretions, painstakingly added, shape by shape, change the look of hair, and faces, and bodies in the advertisements. They also override the significance of the texts by conjuring the worlds of their subjects.

Visual art's shroud of silence is shattered up by the chatter in each of these boxes: Blak exploitation, Blak entrepreneurship, white supremacy is undermined by Blak communality, Blak struggle, Blak life. Above all, by the work of Black women reimagining themselves.

On the wall alongside *Deluxe*, Als cites Angela Davis from 1995:

> In my opinion, the most exciting potential of women of color formations resides in the possibility of politicizing this identity—basing the identity on politics rather than the politics on identity.

Well, yes. But do not elide the word "formations." Davis had in mind the challenges facing women of differing color when they form coalitions (formations) for particular political purposes, her example is struggle on behalf of immigrants. 13 *Deluxe* is, I think, doing something else. It is looking for a politics for Black women *inside* the identificatory formations, working against them from inside outwards, not taking "politics," including those of other women of color, to be an external given. R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

What is the point of showing, next to this magnificence, a small, clunky drawing by de Kooning, *Reclining Woman*, 1951? To remind us of the white misogyny that prevailed in those days, the days of *Deluxe*, and has come roaring back to the centers of power today? Seems somewhat token, and more than a little reductive, given de Kooning's prodigious, decades long exploration of a variety of male attitudes towards women—one of which, certainly, was misogyny.

Likewise, an oddly conventional Ray Johnson collage *ICE* c.1972 collates homages to Magritte, Man Ray, Claes Oldenburg, and Gertrude Stein in a style that prefigures Gallagher. Fair enough. But it includes an image of British artist Allen Jones' 1969 sculpture *Standing Figure (Hatstand)*, which is unabashedly misogynist.

Black performativity returns to attention in two small collages by Ina Archer, specifically minstrelsy. They hang above a vitrine that shows archival materials, not itemized in the exhibition list, so perhaps important to the curator, signs of his personal space. These include some issues of a zine *Gay Goth Scene* from 2002; a 1970 issue of *Esquire* featuring an essay by Norman Mailer on graffiti; another from 1974 with a Norman

Rockwell style cover showing a young Black boy spray painting something unseeable on a canvas mounted an easel; and two photographs by Sarah Charlesworth of the covers of two books, *Demonology and Witchcraft* (1994-5) and *Greek Myths* (2010-11).

In the corner, opposite *Deluxe*, stands a wooden console on aluminum frame, a Hoffman AM-FM tuner and turntable for High Fidelity records lovingly recreated by Christian Marclay and Steve Wolfe in 1979. We do not hear but can see that on the turntable is *La Voix Humaine* (The Human Voice), a 1930 play by Jean Cocteau, in which actress Bette Bovy conducts an hour-long monologue on the phone with a lover who is to marry someone else the next day.

If the curator was more inclined to include video work, we might expect to see right here, say, Lorna Simpson's double-channel *Corridor*, 2003, which juxtaposes footage from the daily life of a servant in 1860 with that of a well-heeled woman in 1960. We pick up from the latter's telephone conversation with an absent male that her life is no less constrained than that of the former.

The writing on the wall of this space is an undated remark by Sylvia Plath: "And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise." Her suicidal life, fully examined in her poetry, shades these words with meaningfulness. By themselves, they would sit comfortably enough on a college girl's calendar.

This space has acquired an inconclusive air: it is pointing us upstairs, to the rest of the show.

VI

It is hard to think of anything that might better flag our transition to the upper floor than Sarah Charlesworth's *Book*, 2002, an image of a thick book, opened roughly at its center, its text (if there was any) erased by the flare of being photographed. We recall Charlesworth's long career as an artist with an acute ability to highlight meaning—in public discourse vehicles, such as newspapers, for example—by deft removals of inessentials. The wood frame of *Book* is lacquered in the same color as the ground. A

golden glow results. As an object, this becomes an icon, yet a resolutely secular one, of Writing and Reading as such.

Upstairs, entering the new floor, we plunge into two artworks that focus on words and images, on instances of how one requires the other. Ian Hamilton Finlay's poster/poem *Le Circus* (1964) juxtaposed words, colors, shapes and typeface to vividly evoke the sensation overload of being inside the tent, dazzled by the performers. On a stand nearby, Jared Buckhiester's *"collaged reference diary"* is opened at a double page spread. Maintained since 2011, it collects images from magazines, newspapers, and photographic ephemera relevant to his practice, which explores abjection, often through ceramic sculptures of misshapen bodies, matched with drawings and photographs recording his journeys, as a queer man, through the Southern states. He seems unusually alert to the impacts of bodies on others, the marks made, the holes left on departure. In the exhibition, the dairy is open to pages of pasted in images of male wrestlers, surrounded by the artist's notes on the rough intimacy that they show.

VII

Drawing reasserts itself in the upstairs corridor where rough intimacy continues as a theme. A small drawing by Brice Marden, *Letter Drawing 1* (2011), recalls that by Christopher Wool downstairs. And the theme of presence via erasure reappears: the white shellac that Marden uses to remove some of the darker ink lines recalls the "white out" we used to use to cover over mistakes in typing, making the same sheet of paper ready for retyping.

Dominating the corridor is a face-off between Cy Twombly's *Untitled* 1959 and a painting by Umar Rashid. The Twombly echoes the Stingel downstairs: both are triggered by writing on walls in Italy, in Rome (to where Twombly moved in 1957) and Venice, respectively. But whereas the Stingel is a postmodern replica, a raw appropriation of observable graffiti, ratcheted up in silver glitz, all here, right now, over in a second, Twombly delves inside the personal experience of strangers who seek each other's privacy by writing signs of their desires on surfaces open for anyone to see. While some numbers—phone numbers?—some letters and other shapes can be glimpsed, they are mostly tentative, and nearly all erased.

Graffiti does not seem right for what is being sought here, despite it being routinely conjured as a description of Twombly's work. In her essay I cited earlier, Anne Carson nails it:

> What Twombly did was to find his way to a handwriting that has no person in it. Critics sometimes refer to Twombly's line as 'graffiti-like'; I don't think Twombly enjoyed hearing this. Graffiti is often ugly and usually, on some level, activist. Its character is that of 'the egotistical sublime,' as Keats said of Wordsworth.

And

> ...his paintings feature handwritten words inscribed in such a way as to avoid offering any clues to himself or his character or his inside state. Scribbled, scrawled, gauche, idle, unlovely—the hand is no one's, or everyone's, or mythic, or just a stain left behind by something written there before. You cannot get away from yourself in your own hand, I used to think, and yet Twombly does. 14

Non-writing, or perhaps better, unwriting is what occurs on the perpetually unfinished surfaces of paintings such as this. They are, as we saw in the case of his "blackboard" painting of 1970, built up from a ground of ambiguity generated by repeated acts of marking then erasing, then, towards the end, doing the same with more potentially readable marks that hint at becoming words or signs or gestures but never quite do so. Instead, they remain traces of themselves. Marks as such. Marks of the making of marks by humans, animals, and natural phenomena brushing against each other. Which take time to accrue, and do so randomly. Across eons. In which sense, Twombly's paintings of this period are ruminations on, but also demonstrations of, the unknowability of other beings, of the opacity of oneself, and the desirability of both. 15

Across the corridor sits Umar Rashid's *Nexus of a cosmic crisis at the astrophysical location of the Swerve and Surf* (plates 1-12), 2024. Some similar colors and an uneven composition are all that it shares with *Untitled* 1959. Rashid, who also goes by Frohawk Two Feathers, regularly paints scenes in which actors in American history swap roles, *Hamilton* style, and the outcomes of events are reversed: Black and Native Americans

usually win. So, too, here, except that this work attempts to conjure a near future filled with avatars from comics, television, movies, and games. As apocalyptic fires rain down, a muscular, silver Quicksilver surfer zaps the Beavis and Buff Head-style helmeted head off a pink (!) Darth Vader/Roman Emperor figure. Meanwhile, The Invisible Black Woman rises in triumph, Wonder Woman style. Yet these rather so-so, hand-drawn illustrations of the dynamics of screen space feel awkward, anachronistic.

This inclusion feels awkward. It is a bright and shiny, immediately appealing, quickly forgettable, hole in the flow of the show. Connections with other works are hard to see.

There is, however, an object shaped like a decapitated head on the floor below and left of the Twombly. I'm hoping we are not being asked to see it has having dropped from Twombly's dense ruminations or having been flicked out of Rashid's lightweight fantasmagoria. It looks like an extruded, abject door stop.

The object on the floor is Kevin Beasley's *Mophead*, 2017, a mop head made in polyurethane foam and wrapped in polyurethane resin. Actual mops heads and the hairstyle itself are evoked. As if the head from one of the artist's well-known costume sculptures, many of which have no heads, has escaped from another installation. 16 Those ghosts are, however, only present to those with some assumed knowledge. For the rest of us, this blob of nausea is placed to announce a mood turn into the next space...

VIII

...where a wall text citing James Baldwin returns us to deeper reflections on the main themes.

> ...And though black had been described to me as the absence of light, it became very clear to me that if this were true, we would never have been able to see the color, black: the light is trapped in it and struggles upward, rather like that grass pushing upward through the cement. It was humbling to be forced to realize that light fell down from heaven, on everything, on everybody, and that the light was always changing. 17

Displayed alongside a first edition of Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), this sentiment becomes a speech bubble, as if from this book. *Notes of a Native Son* combined deeply personal reflections on its author's life in the United States and Europe with polemical essays from *Harper's Magazine* and the *Partisan Review* aimed at changing public policy towards African Americans in the US. It also includes critiques of black writers, such as Richard Wright, and of black theater—*Carmen* with an all-black cast—that, to Baldwin, remained trapped within stereotypes. The book has moved many, including the present writer. I do not doubt that it remains talismanic for writers such as Als. So, why does the quote from Baldwin drift towards universality, evoke the touch of transcendence? He was, after all, puzzling over the colors in a leaf, their complexity, their variegation, their transience. 18 God's light falls on all, equally? Really?

We are in the space above that in which the bust of Baldwin sits on the floor below. The copy of *Notes of a Native Son* parallels the position of the two writing tablets that conjured a rural student, perhaps unlettered. The bust is paralleled on this upper floor by a reliquary guardian figure, Eyema Byeri, strongly carved and painted a deep black by an unrecorded Betsi-Nzaman artist, from the Fang peoples, at some time in the nineteenth century. It is presented here on an elegant modernist desk, and encased in plexiglass. This curatorial gesture is a very powerful aesthetic double whammy, but it is a mix that also screams "primitivism."

Unless one thinks of works by Matthew Angelo Harrison, who encases African artefacts in quasi-transparent resin molds that entrap whatever ancestral power they may have had, while at the same time, through his use of Afrotropes in shaping the molds, suggests the possibility of the release of a power that might be effective in the present.

Als is hinting at a similar possibility by mirroring *Notes of a Native Son* with an unusual work by Andy Warhol, *Close Cover Before Striking*, 1961. One of a series of reproductions of matchbook covers, many bearing advertisements, this version is extremely minimal: two of its three horizontal bands depict the flap and base in flaming red, embossed with the instruction and the name of the manufacturer, while the dominant center band consists of black flammable material, with bold scratches etched across it. Light a match? Ignite a race riot? An abstract(ed) painting, yes, but

made at the time of Warhol's *Race Riot* silkscreens, at a time of intense struggle against white racism, as the Civil Rights movement—of which Baldwin was a key initiator—met with severe resistance.

Als takes us back to these times, to 1962, with a wall text that cities Baldwin's famous *New Yorker* essay calling for "the fire next time!":

> And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands: we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything , the fulfilment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in the song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time! 19

On the window overlooking Tenth Avenue, a mostly transparent scrim supports a large photograph by Judy Linn, of *James Joyce on 23rd St*. Joyce never visited New York, although his books were well known here, not least the banned then pirated edition of *Ulysses* in the late 1920s. Actually, this work is miscaptioned. It is a photograph, taken by Linn in 1971, of a photograph of Joyce taped by Patti Smith to the window of her apartment/studio on 23rd Street, a short walk from where we stand. 20 Although Baldwin doubtless visited the Chelsea Hotel when in New York, he never lived on this street: he grew up in Harlem, spent time in the West Village, but more time in his apartment on West 71st.

The requirements of the writerly life, the imperatives of serious writing, of literature, are reappearing as the wellspring of value. James Joyce is a writer who is, one guesses, as talismanic for Als as he is for countless others, including me. His image, floating again on a window—against the backdrop of places with some cultural claim, not least Bolletino's, across the street—points us across the room to an alcove containing two items. Set high on a shelf, like a votive object, is an invitation to the commemorative

event for Joan Didion (1934-2021), presumably sent to Als himself. It features an iconic image of the writer, staring implacably at the camera, one arm folded, the other raised, cigarette prominent. A wall text nearby presents this long quotation:

> The authentic Western voice, the voice heard in [Norman Mailer's] "The Executioner's Song", is one heard often in life but only rarely in literature, the reason being that to truly know the West is to lack all will to write it down. The very subject of "The Executioner's Song" is that vast emptiness at the center of Western experience, a nihilism antithetical not only to literature but also to most other forms of human endeavor, a dread so close to zero that human voices fade out, trail off, like skywriting." 21

It is an extract from Didion's *New York Times* review of Mailer's 1,000-page evocation of the last days of murderer Gary Gilmore before his execution by firing squad. The "West," here, is not the Postwar geopolitical order, but the region within the US where "every road runs into the desert or the Interstate or the Rocky Mountains." Where no roads run East. Didion concludes that only Mailer would dare attempt to write such an "astonishing book." We cannot doubt that Als feels the same way about Didion. 22

The Didion image is paired with a bust by Italian Impressionist sculptor Medardo Rosso, *Rieuse*, 1890. Set on a stand, it faces away from Didion, towards us. A laughing (self-involved, perhaps hysterical, young) woman versus Ms Sardonic High Seriousness, recently deceased—how does this parse? Try this: Some works of visual art can capture the nature of the kind of writing of which an authentic writer is capable, while others simply cannot. That Rosso generated multiple variations on this theme reinforces such a reading.

From "a purely aesthetic point of view"—the quick glance sensitive to visual correspondences—we get it that the melting wax surface of the Rosso head resonates with the similar colors and icky tack of the Beasley head. There is a transition of sorts here, a shared ugliness.

IX

On the wall of the catwalk above the atrium, two “word” works by Christopher Wool: *Untitled* 1990 spells out CATSINBAGBAGSIN RIVER, while *Untitled*, 1992, gives us HOLEINYOURFUCKINHEAD. The ugliness continues. In such crisp lettering. No ambiguities here.

X

The culminating space is dominated by Ina Archer’s *Black Black Moonlight: A Minstrel Show*, 2024, the first and only video in the exhibition. We watch, with headsets, a large film screen with two television monitor sized screens on either side, between which an astonishing spectacle unfolds. From a 1933 Bing Crosby musical, shot in black and white, Archer has extracted a long sequence in which a black actress sings a suicide note (the song “Black Moonlight”) while around her dancers gyrate, their skin color refracting from white to black and back again. 23 Other sections of the video show the Duncan Sisters acting Uncle Tom’s Cabin roles, and Topsy Turvy dolls that flip between white and black skin color and dress mode. Cut into this phantasmagoria is footage from the televised debate at the Cambridge Union in 1965 on the question of whether “The American dream is at the expense of the American Negro.” Famously, and with an eloquence that moves us to this day, James Baldwin spoke for the affirmative, while William F. Buckley argued the negative. Buckley’s gestures and tone read as those of a performing doll, a puppet—to Archer, a minstrel. In contrast, Baldwin delivers his points with a measured mix of acuity and grace.

A small Archer collage of two white actors in blackface painted white by her, brings us to the work that seems to conclude the exhibition: Christian Marclay’s *Light Blue Door (The Electric Chair)*, 2006. Silkscreen on paper, this life-sized image pictures a door that, because it is an image, we cannot actually enter, but are nonetheless drawn to do so, as it is partially open, inviting us in. Until we recognize it as the door to the room in which those sentenced to death are executed.

Death has haunted a few of the exhibits, albeit at some removal: the Baldwin bust, Rashid’s zaps, the Beasley mophead, Didion’s comment on Mailer, perhaps the Warhol. Maclay’s door returns us to Warhol, as this is one of a series that allude to the Pop master’s *Electric Chair* silkscreens of 1964, part of his Death and Disaster series.

Pivotal for Maclay, and for Als, is the electric sign above the door that calls for SILENCE when the room is in use. For this artist so attuned to the situations in which music is made, it is no coincidence that the same sign is used outside entrances to sound recording studios. The sound of music becomes possible when it is surrounded by silence.

Death might also be behind this door. But here, not so much. A sense of an ending, rather. A closure to the show, to the performance of this exhibition, to the curator's demonstration. A pointer to our own exit from the building, hopefully to the mental spaces in which we will reflect upon the experience given to us, on what we have learnt from it.

But wait! One more image, quietly affixed to the final, side wall: Judy Linn's *Leaves of Grass, title page public library*, 2016, a print of a photograph of Walt Whitman's famous book of poems. A quintessential New Yorker, this volume is popularly known for its most famous line, from his *Song of Myself, 51*: "I am large; I contain multitudes." This, too, may be our exit, one through which other people are no longer our nightmare but our salvation.

The Scenario of Writing

Stepping outside these spaces, thinking about the kinds of knowledge it has generated, one is first grateful for its unusually high quantum of such knowledge, and for much of its quality, the few quibbles and puzzlements noted, then quietened.

How does the overall "argument" of the show, its "thesis," announced by Als, stand up now? Let's start with the ideas stated in its title.

First, *The Writing's on the Wall*. Taking this in its usual sense, as a forewarning, what does the exhibition declare about fate? Whose fate? Nothing so large as that of the species, or of a people. Perhaps, as the subtitle suggests, the end is in sight for literature—or, to cut closer to what we have been shown, for the practice of writing. Yet the exhibition reveals multiple, mostly productive, tensions between what writing can do when it becomes literature and what the visual arts can do when they reach a

parallel level (for which, perhaps mercifully, there is no equivalent term in our discourse).

So, what's fate got to do with it? I sense this part of the title is a distraction, a publicist's idea to lighten the leaden seriousness of the subtitle. As we saw, there being no captions to each artwork, the only actual writings on the walls of this exhibition were certain citations from writers and poets. Most of them were OK as signposts, but few made us work as hard as did (most of) the visual artworks on show. One call by Baldwin was incendiary then, and should be so again, now. None put it to us as sharply as did the poem by Adrienne Rich.

Literature and Silence in the Visual Arts. Well, yes, this is the meat of the exhibition. Explored in all the ways that I have tried to articulate, and doubtless in several more, to which I remain blind. But not in ways as wide in scope, as general in purchase, as the subtitle suggests. Timewise, items range from Baldwin's book of 1955 to Ina Archer's installation and collages of 2024, with many from the 1970s and most from the past twenty years. With the exception of the Fang artefact, Finaly's poster/poem, and perhaps Stingel's defaced wall, every work was made in New York, or in relation to the city's art scene. So, too, for every book shown or mentioned, save the Flaubert (from whom, we saw, Levine snatched authorship). Universal claims cannot be made on such a narrow base. Doing so is Empire provincialism. Appealing to the practicalities of propinquity is no excuse. Using such a generalizing subtitle betrays a laziness about categories that is, as we saw, absent from Als's actual curating, alert as he is to the specificities manifest in (most of) the chosen artworks and texts.

So, the focus is on New York, from the 1950s to the present, on how its visual artists grappled with language, its potentialities and its limits, during these decades. Put this baldly, the absence of conceptual artists active in the 1960s and 1970s is as blatant here as it is in the more supposedly "objective" surveys such as those at MoMA. Would it have been too tiresome to include a work from Joseph Kosuth's *Art As Idea As Idea* series, not least the one subtitled *Silence*, from 1968? Even as a work that went against the grain of the show, something Peter Wollen did with Kosuth's work when curating his section of *Global Conceptualism, Points of Origins 1950s-1980s*, at the Queens Museum, in 1999.

Another pause for reflection occurs when one thinks of the *Silence=Death* poster from 1985. Conceived by an artist-activist collective during the AIDS crisis, when public knowledge of it was being actively denied by health officials and the Reagan White House, it was taken up and widely disseminated by ACT UP. Too obvious to be included? Not actually a work of art?

Of the thirty artists and writers in the exhibition, eight are African American. The talismanic presence of James Baldwin sets the early tone, Gallagher's *Deluxe* anchors the ground floor, and Archer's *Black Black Moonlight: A Minstrel Show* is the culminating experience on the upper floor. This presence is insistent but not everywhere insisted upon. Black is hard to see in the main space, the atrium, which I dubbed The Scenario of the Act of Writing. The Warhol matchbook, perhaps the Rashid, is as close as we get to an incendiary politics.

None of the superstars of the recent flowering of Black aesthetics—Kerry James Marshall, Arthur Jafa, Steve MacQueen, Theaster Gates, Deanna Lawson, Simone Leigh, Mikalene Thomas, and several other artists of what Tina M. Campt calls "the black gaze"—appear, despite the relevance of many of their works to the main themes of the show. 24 And where is Jean-Michel Basquiat, an artist whose entire practice was grounded in words, lists, concepts—their sounds, their look, their nakedness in white space (the look of silence?)—matters to which he returned, constantly, throughout his short life? Imagine an appropriately inappropriate Basquiat paired across the upper corridor with the Twombly. In his essay, Als evokes memories of learning about the core "the democratic function of art" from gay curators such as Diego Cortez, and from artists, such as Basquiat, who they showed. He learnt that "the people who came to see the shows made the show, and the curator was the presiding artist but not the dominant one."

Noting that "The language of perception, particularly of the black experience in art, is difficult to acquire," he suggests that this sense of a shared mission—one shared, perhaps, between today's incarnations of Baldwin's relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks—is one he hopes to recapture in this exhibition. Evoking Walter Benjamin's dialectical image of the angel of history, Als pictures us as being "in perpetual motion backwards," driven by "a desire to relate the illusion of memory, based

on their facts, to the illusory present." The high road beyond minstrelsy is through its ups and downs.

After which he allows himself a conclusion that is, regrettably, as vapid as his title and subtitle: "It is often difficult to understand *now* until it is past. The point is to enjoy the show."

No, please spare us the easy exit. Instead, I hope to have shown that this show is a rare instance in which an insightful curator has enabled us, *here and now*, to understand much about the *nows* that were then, and to be, like Baldwin's lovers, *enjoined* while doing so.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, transl. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 22c. Did he mean to say that dictionaries—tautological machines, books full of words about words—have the power to make all words seem the same, that is, to present them as naming devices? And what of "the personification of time"? First, dictionaries take (the meaning of) words out of time, placing them on the page, the same page for all who read them. Then they inject temporality (actually, history) into the words by listing their etymology—that is, how certain persons, presumed to speak for their times, used them at the time.

2. Boris Groys, "Exhibitions, Installations, and Nostalgia," in Terry Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2015), 61.

3. These are pointed versions of question I have been asking in books such as *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), *Talking Contemporary Curating* (2015), and *Curating the Complex and The Open Strike* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021). Among them: What is contemporary curatorial thought, curatorial thinking, as distinct from that of artists, critics, historians, theorists, gallerists, collectors, etc.? And what is exhibitionary knowledge, that is, what is distinctive about the knowledge gained when experiencing an exhibition, as distinct from reading about art, or viewing collections rooms in a museum (themselves becoming increasingly like temporary exhibitions)?

4. The sideways “M” is not as distinct in the replica. Although a silent question always hovers over these pieces: which is the replica? It is a relatively trivial issue. At least Als did not show Celmins’s better known simulated stone piece. That would be showing the double for its own sake, not as part of the incipient narrative of this show. And would send us down the rabbit hole of reproducibility in the written and visual arts via-à-vis each other.

5. Just how important Baldwin has been for Als is attested in several essays, books and exhibitions, including “The Enemy Within,” *The New Yorker*, February 8, 1998; *James Baldwin/Jim Brown and the Children* (The Artists’ Institute, Hunter College, New York, 2017); and *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait for James Baldwin* (New York: David Zwirner Gallery, 2019; Dancing Fox Press/Brooklyn Museum, 2024).

6. Als himself shows some restraint in not citing the immediately preceding lines, where she cites her father’s remarks about “Superior people”:

> they sometimes enjoy solitude,
> And can be robbed of speech
> by speech which has delighted them.

See https://poets.org/poem/silence-2. This happens to us, often, as we “get” the juxtapositions in this exhibition, when we pass through it the first time. Pleasurable though each of these moments are, they, too, amount to a kind of silencing. The text you are reading now is an effort to fill that void.

7. Then I find this in Als’s essay: “the artist conveys the sense we have when language isn’t yet working , when it is deciding what to be before it becomes words.” Oops.

8. Anne Carson, “Beware the man whose handwriting sways like a reed in the wind,” *London Review of Books*, vol. 47, no. 4, 6 March, 2025, at https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v47/n04/anne-carson/beware-the-man-whose-handwriting-sways-like-a-reed-in-the-wind. See Roland Barthes, *The Responsibilities of Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).

9. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

10. On her website, Jones names her 2011 installations “Absorb Silence.” See https://www.jenniecjones.com/2011-the-kitchen.

11. But also, “black mo’nin,” on which see Fred Moten, *In the break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003), 209-10.

12. *MoMA Highlights: 375 Works from The Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), see https://www.moma.org/collection/works/93924.

13. Angela Davis, “Reflections on Race, Class and Gender in the USA,” interview with Lisa Lowe, 1995, in Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 318.

14. Carson, “Beware the man whose handwriting sways like a reed in the wind.”

15. Art historians might ponder the echoes of paintings such as *Excavation* (1950) by Willem de Kooning and wonder whether they might have similarly interesting implications as partial portraits of Postwar Europe.

16. In 2022, in these spaces, Beasley curated a Hill Foundation exhibition entitled *A body, revealed*, in which that juxtaposition occurred. Included in that exhibition was a work, *On the path to reconciliation*, 2022, in which the artist wrapped in resin four copies of the catalogue of the *Phillip Guston Now* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, then being held back from viewing due to concerns over the impact of the artist’s citing of Klu Klux Klan figures. The exhibition went ahead, April to August 1923, with elaborate contextual framing. In Boston, viewers who anticipated being offended by these figures were given an alternative exit from the show. How might Beasley’s sardonic piece fit the present exhibition? More readily. And its inclusion would rachet up the racial tensions, which remain below boiling point.

17. *Beauford Delaney: A Retrospective*, 1964. Actually, “On the painter Beauford Delaney,” in *Transitions*, 4, no. 18 (1965), reprinted in Toni Morrison ed., *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 720.

18. Leaves pressed against the windows of Delaney’s Paris studio. See Nicholas Boggs, “Baldwin/Delaney/Cazac,” in Amy J. Elias, *Speculative Light: The Arts of Beauford Delaney* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025), 146-159 .

19. James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *The New Yorker*, November 9, 1962.

20. See Linn’s blog of June 2020, where she reproduces this photograph and a Patti Smith poem about her taping of this photograph: https://plasticekphrastic.com/category/judy-linn/#_edn1. At the time, Smith lived with Robert Mapplethorpe at 209 West 23rd, before moving with him into the Chelsea Hotel two buildings along.

21. Joan Didion, “I want to Go ahead and Do It,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1979.

22. See his *Joan Didion: What She Means*, an exhibition at the Hammer Museum: Los Angeles, and book, Delmonico Press, New York, 2022.

23. Presumably the film *Too Much Harmony*, in which Crosby sang “Black Moonlight.”

24. Tina M. Campt, *The Black Gaze* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).