

PAYING  
HAVING  
TAKING  
KEEPING

BY ROSS SIMONINI

An essay on the inherent moral conflict  
of making art in a world of decreasing attention  
and increasing visibility.

The measurement of art is attention. All art wants it, and yet there is not enough attention in all the world for even half of existing art. Attention is the most important form of energy humans have to give, and we should be careful with it. Conserve it. Simone Weil wrote, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."<sup>1</sup> William James wrote, "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground. Intelligible perspective, in a word."<sup>2</sup>

People can get by (poorly, sadly) without being attended to, but art cannot. Without attention, a masterpiece doesn't exist. So the basic job of an artist is to develop her own attention: to other people, to the feeling of being inside a body, to her environment, and maybe, if she likes, to other art. She has to become sensitive to what attracts her focus. This is how she trains. Skill and talent are unnecessary.

But giving attention is hard. It requires discipline, fanaticism, focus-inducing substances, or perhaps some kind of malady strong enough to shut down the barrage of stimuli around us and allow for deep absorption. Sustained attention is near-impossible. The Internet knows this. You can now find, at the top of many articles, the estimated length of time the piece will take to read. In fact, for James, sustained attention didn't even exist. He saw a single stretch

of attention as a series of short bursts linked together in a daisy chain. At the end of each of these, the mind wanders and must, again and again, return to its concentration. Repetition creates the illusion of continuity.

Once the artist has the ability to give and (maybe) keep attention she has to learn to get it. At first, she is only concerned with getting her own attention. She has to make a sparkling conductor of attention that will consistently lure her own interest. Then she has to manipulate that interest, shape it, control it, direct it, and subvert it. Even the hermit artist, alone in the woods works primarily in the medium of attention—her own. James again: "When we come down to the root of the matter, we see that (geniuses) differ from ordinary men less in the character of their attention than in the nature of the objects upon which it is successively bestowed."<sup>3</sup>

But most artists are public figures and must ask for attention from other people, even though the quantity and quality will vary for every artist. A film composer asks for a supportive, atmospheric awareness—too much scrutiny would be distraction. A public sculptor makes an object that few people purposely regard, and yet it will be experienced by incomprehensibly large numbers of people. A novelist may write a multi-volume work that requires multiple readings and years of obsessive study to be fully experienced. A painter makes an image that requires only a single glance, but goes on to loiter in the mind's eye for a life-time.

The attention an artist desires may be momentary, repulsive or humble, and yet, to ask for any amount of a precious, limited resource is significant. As we all know from history, everyone cannot be special, and every artist cannot warrant study. So asking for attention is asking to be regarded as remarkable, more so than the other artists, who are also asking for attention. The artist who wants to be considered great—or considered at all, really—seeks to exert power over other artists, and ultimately to dominate them. It is an act of aggression and competition that even the youngest child artist is familiar with, waving her just-finished drawing in the air, demanding that the nearest authority figure recognize its brilliance.

So the mature artist accepts that as soon as the work is finished, she is corrupted. This is the artist's role in our society: to be impure, thrown into a state of moral turpitude. She wants

an attention that, most likely, she will never fully receive. Depending on the artist, this could be a source of debilitating anxiety, generative energy, or both. For culture, this is the archetype of the mad artist—Munch, Mishima, Van Gogh, Plath, Woolf—the spectacle of inner frustration.

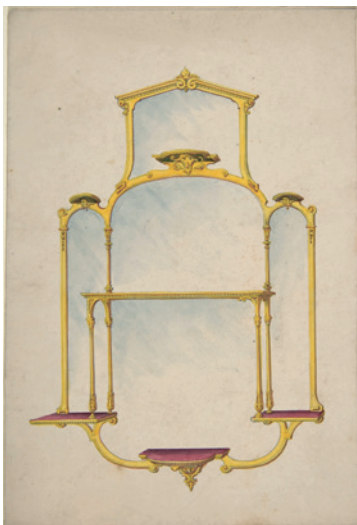
But there is another human archetype who needs attention to survive: the narcissist. Like the artist, they ask for attention from others, but for them, the focus must be aimed at their personality, not their work. It's a clear distinction, but it becomes fuzzy in a culture that places celebrity artists before their work. The history of art is a history of names. The object is simply the means for the name to live on. "When writers die," Jorge Luis Borges wrote, "they become books."<sup>4</sup>

So the artist accepts that she is constantly wrestling with narcissism. To keep herself sane, she learns to pay close attention to the dangerous power of her own gaze and where it is directed. But she also accepts that she will, at times, fail. "Attention without feeling," Mary Oliver writes, "is only a report. An openness—an empathy—is necessary if the attention is to matter."<sup>5</sup>

In America, a narcissist has attained absolute power. We only have so much attention in our national supply, and yet, since the 1980s, we have given much of it to him: in television



Anonymous, *Allegory on Vanity*, Germany, 17th century. Photo: CC0 / The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1966 / The Met, New York



Anonymous, *Design for a Hanging Mirror with Shelves*, British, 19th century. Photo: CC0 / Rogers Fund, 1966 / The Met, New York









Brian Belott, Selection of works from the Rhoda Kellogg International Children's Art Collection, David Perident Art Installation view at Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome. Photo: Thomas Müller



Mirror, New Kingdom, Upper Egypt, Thebes, Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, Tomb of Hatnefer and Ramose, ca. 1492–1473 B.C. Photo: CC0 / Rogers Fund, 1936 / The Met Fifth Avenue, New York



shows, cameos, cover stories, satires. He was the butt of our jokes, but he didn't mind. The narcissist's appetite is indiscriminate—disgust, admiration, pity. Clicks are clicks.

So let's be wise with our attention and discuss him no further. Instead let's redirect our attention to the environment that supports such a phenomenon, a place where everyone has become the narcissistic artist, "sharing" and, in turn, asking for their due attention. A dystopian twist on Beuys' credo. But everyone is also the art patron. We "support," "follow," "like," and "friend" these behaviors. We encourage their value, and in doing so, create a hierarchy in which the most narcissistic personality is the most valuable.

Art culture, too, has worked hard to dignify the narcissist, a term that has become near-synonymous with genius: Picasso, Mahler, Hitchcock, Kanye, the diva. In her 2014 novel *Dept. of Speculation*, Jenny O'fill refers to the "art monster," the male artist who destroys or neglects every aspect of life outside of his art. "Nabokov didn't even fold his own umbrella," she wrote. "Vera licked his stamps for him."<sup>6</sup> In a 2016 issue of *European Journal of Finance*, professor Yi Zhou published a paper on empirical asset pricing that claimed, "It is more profitable to invest in the artworks of more narcissistic artists."<sup>7</sup> Using graphology (the study of handwriting) Zhou concluded that artists with bigger signatures have bigger egos—a literal depiction of how much of the work is comprised of the artist's identity.

In a letter to the editor of *Art News*, Helen Frankenthaler wrote, "Why must you gossip about the personality of the artist? Some of us are interested in painting."<sup>8</sup> As an expert of

attention, the artist must reveal the true nature of attention to a world that has forgotten its potential, as a tool, a drug, a currency, and a weapon.

Maybe there was a time when the art stood before the artist, when the ego and the art were not in conflict, but we do not live there now. Maybe indigenous crafts and folk art can express this. Or maybe the oblivious artists attain it: the outsiders, the mentally handicapped, the scribbling children. Or the anonymous artist, whose name is forever severed from her work. The unidentified Delta blues guitarist Kid Bailey. The Master of the Playing Cards. The Master of the Furies. The so-called Philadelphia Wireman, who is not an artist at all, but a thousand sculptures found in an alley in the 1970s, tossed out like garbage, found and exhibited as if it were an artist.

On the street, it's easy to be anonymous, and yet the most distinctive urban art is tagging, a form of art that is simply the artist's own signature (the most magnified expression of Zhou's theory). David Hammons has spoken of walking through Manhattan, creating art as he goes—untitled, unattributable assemblages in gutters and alleyways across the city, each one potentially worth millions. In a rare interview, he said, "That's why I like doing stuff better on the street, because the art becomes just one of the objects that's in the path of your everyday existence. It's what you move through, and it doesn't have any seniority over anything else."<sup>9</sup> More than most artists, Hammons has tried to separate himself from his work, and yet the fascination with the man has only grown because of this.

But does even the unknown artist actually escape Frankenthaler's gossip of personality? Or is it projected onto them? When I listen to the "Concerto Grosso for Two Oboes" and Strings by Anonymous, does my attention rest gently on the work, truly experiencing an

ego-less wonder, as I would a tree or a rainbow? Or do I never really give the work my full attention because somewhere, in the corner of my mind, I am endlessly reconstructing the person who is trying to escape her own fate?

Pseudonyms, pen names and monikers will not save us. The author Elena Ferrante. The inventor Satoshi Nakamoto. The musician Burial. These people know what they have done and sooner or later, they all seem to be exposed. In the Google era, you can't hide for very long. As a culture, we can't allow artists to pretend as if they've beaten the game in which the rest of us have to compete. We all know an artwork can't exist without a personality, and that a pure artwork is as impossible as a pure human being. That fantasy dissolves as soon as we begin to try.

The Master of the Playing Cards, King of the Wild Men, ca. 1435-1455. Photo: Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin



1. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, (London: Routledge, 2003).
2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890).
3. Ibid.
4. Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges On Writing*, (New York: Harper, 1994).
5. Mary Oliver, *Our World*, (London: Penguin, 2009).
6. Jenny O'fill, *Dept. of Speculation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).
7. Yi Zhou, "Narcissism and the art market performance," (*The European Journal of Finance*, 2014).
8. A letter to the editor by Helen Frankenthaler, *ArtNews* (May 1960).
9. Elena Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliq-aard Ball Sale*, (London: Afterall Books, 2017).

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Left - Philadelphia Wireman, *Untitled (Watch Face)*, ca. 1970-1975. Courtesy: Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia and Adams and Ollman, Portland  
Right - Philadelphia Wireman, *Untitled (tape with drawing, wire)*, ca. 1970-1975. Courtesy: Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia and Adams and Ollman, Portland



Ross Simonini, *Anxiety Napkins*, 2013-2014, *Bad Fog* installation view at Martos Gallery, New York, 2014. Courtesy: Martos Gallery, New York